

over and over again by unstuckintime

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Summary:

Steve jerked forward, the steering wheel alive under his hands and Robin screaming right in his ear.

Or, the one where Steve is stuck in a time loop.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

AU. Wasn't a fan of the whole "three months later" thing, so this fix-it takes place immediately after the gang leaves Starcourt.

The first—and last—thing Steve did after he left Starcourt was take a shower. Well, actually, that wasn't technically true. He let Robin take one first.

The soldiers had mostly left them alone, and after Jonathan and Nancy got the kids bundled up into police cars headed for home, there hadn't been much else to do but go back to his place. Starcourt was toast, El was with Joyce, and Owens had taken one look at Steve's shaking hands and offered to retrieve Dustin. Steve was bone-deep tired in a way he had probably never been before. Sometime during all the chaos, a solemn faced cadet had caught up with Steve and returned his keys. Steve had been so grateful he nearly hugged the guy.

Now Steve and Robin were loitering in the back lot, picking through rubble and occasionally blinking at each other like they needed to make sure the other person was still there.

"Can I," Robin said, looking strained and pale under the the humming parking-lot lights, "I mean, could I maybe come with you? I don't really wanna be alone right now, and my parents are out of town."

She looked away and rubbed her arms. "I mean, monsters are real, apparently! How do I—am I supposed to start checking under my bed for them again?"

"Yeah," Steve said, and tossed her the keys to his Beemer, "you get used to it. My advice: keep your mattress on the floor."

The drive through Hawkins was eerie. Warmly lit houses stood vacant, their front doors left wide open, empty cars ran in driveways,

abandoned bikes littered the sidewalks—all of them waiting for owners who would never come back. Pajama clad townspeople loitered in their front yards, staring slack-jawed at the plumes of smoke hanging in the sky over Starcourt. Occasionally Steve could hear voices shouting, or weeping, as they drove by, windows down and summer air whipping at their hair—but nothing else. Not even crickets.

The car barely survived the drive home. Debris from the battle had pummeled the beemer's hood and left it pockmarked and uneven. By the time Robin pulled up in front of Steve's house, the undercarriage was leaking oil and two hubcaps had bounced off. Steve didn't spare it a second glance before he hustled Robin up the sidewalk. His baby was a great set of wheels, but the TODFTHR had blown every other car out of the water. That convertible had to be the coolest ride he'd ever driven—*until he'd used it to—*

A vision of Billy slumped behind the wheel of his slick little Camaro floated up and doused Steve with icy guilt. He shook his head hard, like a wet dog, to rid himself of the memory. Physically “shaking things off” was a trick Steve had been taught by a counselor he saw after the events of the last winter, and he sometimes used when he thought about bad things. It sometimes worked.

Steve blinked hard and shouldered his way through the front door. The house was so still it seemed to be holding its breath. All the lights were off. The gloom made strange, grotesque shapes out of the furniture. Steve and Robin froze in unison a couple of steps into his foyer. Steve's eyes shut so hard he saw stars. For a moment he thought they'd stay frozen there in the silence for the whole night, but then Robin grabbed the back of his Scoops Ahoy uniform and the feeling returned to Steve's legs.

The two of them wordlessly shuffled through the house, flicking on lamps and drawing the shades. They opened every closet, tensing as the door swung outward, and then jointly breathed a sigh of relief when each one revealed itself to be monster-free. Steve's fingers itched for his bat the whole time.

Finally, Steve stopped them in front of the guest bathroom on the second floor.

“Okay, we’ve established that this is a no-flyer-fly zone, and you stink,” he said. He pointed a stern finger at her. “There are towels in the cabinet and, uh, washcloths? Do you use those?” Steve turned around. “My mom puts them on her face, I think—Robin?”

Robin stepped in close and threw her arms around him. “Thank you,” she mumbled into his chest.

“Oh. Yeah,” Steve said. He tentatively placed a hand on her back. Her polyester uniform was stiff with sweat, and he could see the back of her Robin’s hair was a matted rats-nest. *She* was still alive. If he’d lost her—

Steve swallowed around a lump in his throat.

“Will you stay out here while I shower?” Robin whispered.

This was the moment he would have kissed her, right here. He would have tilted her chin up with his fingers and bent down, so close he could see each individual eyelash. Steve shoved her away abruptly. “Yeah, if you promise to use lots of soap,” he said.

Robin feigned a punch to his kidneys.

The moment Robin shut the door Steve slid down and slumped against it, the wood cool against his skin. He could barely keep his eyes open. The whoosh of water lulled him into an easy doze, and he drifted off into a half-memory-half-dream of being a kid again, sitting outside the bathroom just like this, waiting for his mom to finish getting ready for bed so she’d come read him a story.

“Hey Steve!” Robin called, startling him badly enough that he jerked and his sneakers scuffed the floor, “Can I use your conditioner?”

Steve groaned, and stifled a yawn. “Sure,” he yelled. He scrubbed at the scuff with his nail. “Just be careful, it—“

“ *Shit!* ”

“...goes everywhere.”

“It’s fine, I’ll scoop it up!” Steve heard the sound of shampoo bottles

clattering around. "I'm the best scooper anyway."

"Don't bother!" Steve thumped his head back against the door. "I'm the best scooper. I'll handle it."

After Robin was dry and safely ensconced in a cocoon of blankets in his bed, Steve shambled into the bathroom. It was humid from Robin's shower, the mirror fogged too badly for him to assess the damage to his face. What the hell did he care anyway? Half the town was dead, and that probably included most of the people Steve might have wanted to impress.

Unbidden, the memory of Billy's body on the linoleum rose up behind his eyes. He'd seen Billy stand and catch the mind flayer's tentacle with both hands. He'd seen the flayer jab Billy's side with its razor sharp flags and latch on, then stab him again, and again. Steve hadn't made a sound, just clutched at the railing so hard his knuckles went white, and watched until the flayer tossed Billy's crumpled body aside like trash. Then Steve had looked away and hadn't been able to look back. He'd suddenly remembered— right there with the building falling down around him and the flayer roaring loud enough to burst his eardrums—standing at his locker and watching a classmate dismissively size up a passing Billy. She'd turned and said snidely to her friend, "That boy is pure trash."

Billy had stopped, grinned at her, and purred "Darlin,' if I'm trash why don't you pick me up? I know a good place you could stick me."

She'd reddened all the way to her chest and Billy had throw back his head and laughed.

Now he was dead on the filthy floor of the Starcourt mall.

Fuck. *Fuck*. Steve stumbled into the shower, yanking his uniform shirt off in one practiced motion.

The water was scalding and good on his skin. His eye ached and his throat felt rubbed raw. He could cry in here, and Robin would probably never know.

Steve ran a hand over his face. What did he have to cry about?

I'm fine, Steve told himself. Of course he was fine. He could just hear Billy saying “You’re a dumbass, Harrington.”

—And why the hell was he thinking about Billy so much anyway? Steve had hated him—they had hated each other—and now Billy was dead and Steve was fine.

The water beat down on the back of his neck. He was fine. He shampooed his hair and scrubbed the dried blood off his chin. He took stock of a few cuts and scrapes and soaped each one. After his skin was clean, Steve just stood there, the heat relaxing his muscles and making him feel warm and loose. He caught himself staring trance-like at the water running clear down the drain. Time for fucking bed.

Steve stepped backwards to avoid the spray, and his heel hit a glob of the conditioner Robin had squirted everywhere.

He slipped.

It could have small misstep—would have been usually— but Steve been beaten, drugged, gotten sick, fought a monster straight out of a nerd’s worst nightmares, and been up for probably 30 hours straight, so his reflexes?—shot to hell. In retrospect, any other day he would have caught himself, maybe banged his knees up. Not today. Steve fell hard and fast, cool, unforgiving porcelain flying up to meet him. He barely had enough time to think *fuck* before his skull met the rim of the tub and—

Steve jerked forward, the steering wheel alive under his hands and Robin screaming right in his ear.

“What,” Steve said dumbly.

His body was bent over the in the drivers seat of the TODFTHR, the convertible stalled and smoking near the entrance of a mostly-intact Starcourt. Billy was just visible slumped over in his newly-wrecked car a few feet away, thin flames crawling up the cracked windshield.

Steve had watched him die. Joyce and Hopper had killed the monster, and Steve had gone home. Steve’s black eye throbbed hard

and his ears rung. Nancy called his name. She was waving frantically from passenger seat of the Byers' sedan.

Steve touched his face and felt wetness his fingers.

"Steve," Robin said. She watched him tentatively prod his head. "Are you okay?"

Steve stared out the windshield at Billy again. "But I-I was just in the bathroom?" he said.

"Steve, we gotta move—"

"I don't—I was just in the shower?"

Robin gave him a look of pure horror. "Oh my god," she said, "You're high. You're high and you've been driving us this whole time."

An almighty screech split open the night. The flayer loomed up huge and black from behind the mall, its long limbs scuttling over the roof like a spider.

"I was just in the bathroom," Steve said again, watching it.

"Oh god," Robin wailed.

Everyone in the Byers' sedan swung towards the TODFTHR with saucers for eyes and bellowed Steve's name in perfect unison. Robin rocked up on her knees and kicked her door open. She reached over and grabbed Steve's arm hard.

"I get that you're like, having a really bad trip," she said, "—but we've got to go! Now!"

Robin shoved him toward his door. The flayer cleared the mall and hit the pavement with an earth-shattering thump. Someone was howling "Go, go, go, go!" Jonathan gunned the motor. Steve felt high. He felt crazy.

He leapt over the drivers-side door and stumbled into the back of the sedan with Robin hot on his heels. One of the flayer's tree trunk-thick legs smashed the TODFTHR to smithereens.

I'm dreaming, Steve thought as the car peeled out of the lot. He stared incomprehendingly out the back windshield. The flayer raced after them, its insect legs eating up the ground. Steve didn't remember falling asleep, but *no*—he'd fallen. He remembered. Shower, conditioner, slip, fall. *This was all some kind of head injury...dream.* Steve just had to wake up.

"Hey," he said to Robin, squeezed in across from him, "slap me."

She hit him hard across the bad side of his face before he could even draw another breath. Lucas oOoh'ed from his seat until a concerned looking Will shushed him.

"*That* wasn't because you told me to," Robin hissed, "that was for *whatever* the hell you were doing back there. You could have died!"

"We could have died," Steve pointed out, fingering his cheek.

"No, I wouldn't have died because I would have left you!" She glanced towards the front of the car, lowered her voice and leaned in.

"What did you mean, '*you were just in the bathroom*'? Do you know where we are right now?" Her knees knocked against his.

I—" Steve started, and then a high pitched voice crackled through the walkie.

Suzie. Dusty-poo .

Steve—remembered this. Dustin and Suzie's weirdo little lover's quarrel, and oh—

"They're going to sing *The Neverending Story*," he breathed.

"What?" Robin said.

And then they just—did it. They started fucking singing that song. Like Steve knew they were going to.

The flayer was galloping up behind them, the dark trees zipping past, the moon shining on an open field rippling away to their right.

"It's going to turn around," Steve said, dismayed.

"How did you know what they were going to sing?" Robin whispered.

He ignored her.

It was time for Steve to wake up now. It was time for him to *wake up*. He dropped the walkie talkie on the upholstered floor of the trunk and grabbed his hair.

"Wake up," he commanded. "Wake up."

Steve gave his head a shake. Nothing. He couldn't think over the deafening boom of the flayer pounding closer and Dustin sweetly, obliviously crooning "*stoOory*." Something was rising in Steve's chest, something that clawed and tore.

"C'mon," he moaned. He slapped himself once, then again.

Nancy whipped around and snapped an an indignant "Hey!" and Jonathan, who had obviously been watching him in the rearview mirror, said tightly, "Steve, calm down." Sweat stood out on his forehead.

Just a dream, Steve thought. The mind flayer thundered along behind them, Dustin's clear voice providing a discordant soundtrack, and Steve had thought this was all too much the *first* time.

He grit his teeth, braced his feet on the side of the car, and jerked his body back to slam into the window. Nothing. *Again*.

"Cmon!" he said.

"Stop him!" Nancy shouted. She elbowed Jonathan in her attempt to reach for Steve.

Lucas shot over the back seat and clawed at Steve's shoulders.

"Get off me," Steve snapped, shrinking away. He pressed up against the back windshield and held an advancing Lucas off with one foot.

Robin's voice cut through all the noise. "Steve!" she said. Her thin face was twisted in pain, her hands stretched towards him and hung in the air like birds frozen mid-flight. "You're scaring me," she whispered.

"Look!" Will broke in, pointing behind them, "It's turning around!"

Steve didn't need to look, but he looked anyway. The flayer let out one last roar before it disappeared back the way they came, moving low and fast.

"Hold on," Jonathan grunted and whipped the car into a squealing U-turn.

When they were back on the road and racing towards Hawkins' city limits, Steve resolved himself to the idea that he wasn't going to wake up. He was going to have to ride this out. Maybe if he just didn't make any waves, if he did exactly what he did last time, things would end up like they did before and he could just sit down to shower.

"Sorry," he mouthed at Robin. She narrowed her eyes at him.

Hawkins drew close.

For Steve, the whole nightmare played out exactly as nightmarishly as it did before.

Jonathan motored them back to Starcourt and they all slunk up to the second floor. Again. Steve and Robin pelted the mind-flayer with fireworks while El cowered and screamed in terror. At the last second, a Billy that looked more grim than Steve remembered saved her. Again. Billy stood up and caught the flayer's fanged tentacle and —

Steve couldn't watch it a second time.

He knelt on the floor with his eyes shut until he heard the flayer collapse to the ground, until Max began sobbing her brother's name so loudly it echoed off the walls.

"Cmon," Robin said gently when the dust settled. She helped him up.

“Let’s go.”

Steve could barely walk. Robin let him lean on her the whole way out. She deposited him on a curb with a conciliatory pat on the back. This time Robin helped Jonathan and Nancy get the kids rounded up and shipped off to their respective homes; he saw her flash a tired smile at Nancy and laugh at something Jonathan said. Steve gave Robin his keys when she came back to him, and she pretended not to notice how badly his hands were shaking.

Going through everything the second time had been worse, somehow. Knowing what was going to happen was more terrible than not knowing, he thought. Watch—here it comes!—any second now El is going to realize her adoptive father is dead and she’s going to crumple to the ground—

Steve leaned his head on the cool glass of the car window.

“Are you going to tell me what that all was?” Robin said softly.

The night was a softly moving blur. Robin navigated the Beemer through the empty Hawkins streets.

“In the morning,” Steve told her. She hesitantly touched his hand.

“It’s all over now,” she promised.

-

Steve crawled into the tub and showered sitting down. He sat in the hot spray until the water sluiced all the blood and sweat off him. He crawled out again and fell asleep on his bedroom floor to the sound of Robin snoring gently from his bed.

He woke up, incredibly, refreshed. Neither he nor Robin had stirred for twelve hours, and Steve probably could have slept on if Robin hadn’t tripped over him on her way to the bathroom.

“Why are you on the floor?” Robin said, and peered down at him.

“Sleeping,” Steve mumbled. He nudged her ankle with his big toe.

"I got that," Robin said. She disappeared down the hall and into the bathroom. A pause, and then over the rush of water from the tap Steve heard her yell out: "Why are you doing it on the floor again?"

Steve sniffed haughtily and decided not to dignify the question with a response. He heaved himself up and moseyed into the kitchen, picking the grit from his eyes. His hair stood out from his head in a fluffy halo. A nasty bruise on his thigh had darkened overnight.

Despite everything, Steve weirdly felt...good. Last night—the last two nights—had been hell, but a little *deja vu* wasn't the worst thing to ever happen to him. After everything went down last year, Steve had found the best thing to do with weirdness was to avoid dwelling on it. Demogorgons, demodogs? Sure, okay. Don't think too hard about any of it and move on. The business of seeing a counselor had been short lived, and Steve hadn't been able to really tell her much. His mom was the one who made him go anyway, because Steve had felt fine—he'd just kept screaming in his sleep.

Today was blissfully a new day. The monsters were dead and the sun was streaming golden through the kitchen blinds.

"Do you want coffee?" Steve hollered up the stairs.

Robin made a muffled noise he took as an affirmative.

Steve usually grabbed coffee from a donut shop on his way to work, but he figured the place wasn't open. He knelt and rummaged around under the stove for a beat-up coffee maker his mom refused to get rid of, absently hoping Mr. Rich wasn't one of the flayed. He made crullers Steve would throttle a baby for.

The coffee machine was covered in a fine layer of dust, the electrical cord frayed and threadbare. Steve sighed.

He blew some of the dust off and plugged it in, not expecting much. To his surprise, it powered on. More rummaging turned up a stale bag of coffee beans. Steve found a metal measuring spoon in the back of a drawer and slid it over the counter towards the coffee maker. It came to rest on the the electrical cord.

“Cream? Sugar?” Steve yelled.

“Both, and when you think you’ve added enough, add more!” Robin yelled back.

Steve wrapped one hand around the smooth steel handle of the fridge and grabbed for the measuring spoon with the other.

His fingers brushed the cool metal of the spoon and 120 volts of electricity lit him up like a Christmas tree. The exposed wire sent a current racing across his arm, arching over his chest and down his hand to the fridge. The circuit completed. His heart stuttered, then stopped—

Steve jerked forward, the steering wheel alive under his hands and Robin screaming right in his ear.

Steve ripped his hands away from the wheel like they’d been burned and gasped in a lungful of air. Phantom pain shot little tingles up just forearms. Oh god. He was alive, he was okay—

Then Steve realized where he was.

Night had fallen again, and he was back in front of the Starcourt mall. Billy’s car was in flames beside the TODFTHR.

Nancy and the Byers’ sedan. Will’s little white face gaping at him from the backseat.

“No,” Steve said. “No, no, no, no, no.”

He swung the car door open and stumbled out onto the pavement, hands fisted in his hair. “This isn’t happening, this isn’t real. Not again.” His breath came in short little pants.

Robin stared at him, slack-jawed, from the passenger seat.

“Wha—“ she started.

The flayer cut her off with a roar like metal fingernails scraping a metal chalkboard. Steve didn’t even flinch.

“Get in the car,” Nancy screamed, scrambling into the sedan. Lucas and Will clung to each other in the backseat.

Steve stared at them all and backed away towards the woods at the edge of the parking lot. He couldn’t.

He couldn’t take the nerve-shredding drive out of Hawkins, Dustin’s voice crackling through the walkie so sickly sweet Steve’s teeth ached. He couldn’t take the fireworks and the flayer screeching, the smell of burning flesh acrid in his nose, and he couldn’t take the feeling that washed over him when Max sobbed Billy’s name. Steve had to get out of there. He had to run.

“I-I—” he said, and turned tail and booked it into the trees.

“Dude!” He heard Lucas shout.

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The sound changed in the woods, like Steve was underwater, everything growing muffled and soft. Even the night breeze was cooler. Distantly, he heard the Byers’ sedan roaring away, and the earth-rattling crash of the flayer landing on concrete. He kept going.

Steve was two hundred yards into the thicket when he realized someone had followed him. He whirled around with his fists up and nearly slipped on some dead leaves.

“What the fuck!” Robin panted, stopping short. She shoved him. Hard.

Steve yelped and cringed away. Robin’s nostrils flared like a bull’s.

“What are you doing?” she hissed. “Are you literally out of your mind?”

Steve yanked at his hair helplessly. “Yeah, yeah I am out of my mind, okay, Robin? I think I’ve died twice now and I each time I do—okay, each time I’ve died I’ve come right back here!”

“The woods?” Robin asked.

Steve turned around and ground his palms into his eyes.

“Okay I’m sorry,” Robin soothed, relenting a little, “you died? Like dead as a doornail dead?”

Steve didn’t want to explain everything to her, not while she was watching him with a mixture of disbelief and poorly concealed concern, but he knew he was out of his depth. Robin was smart. Maybe she’d know if this was some kind of psychosis, or—

“Yeah I’m pretty fucking sure I died. The first time I slipped, and then just now, I was making us coffee and I must have been, I dunno, electrocuted?”

Robin nodded patiently. “Do you think you could be having a reaction to the crazy Russian drug we were injected with? Not that I don’t think you died!—” she put up a hand to stop Steve from interrupting, “but wouldn’t a more likely explanation be just a really, really bad trip?”

She had a point, as much as Steve didn’t think it was true. Who knew what effects a truth telling serum could have on a person? One time Steve had smoked so much pot with Tommy time felt like it slowed to a crawl. He’d never had time repeat itself before, but Tommy’s ditch weed wasn’t half as strong as whatever the hell he and Robin had been given.

“Maybe,” Steve conceded.

“Listen,” Robin said, “we can talk about this, but can we get out of here first? This place gives me the creeps.”

For the first time since he’d realized Robin was pursuing him, Steve looked around. The world under the trees was shadowy, the dim light of the moon only illuminating a few feet in front of them. More concerning, the woods were totally silent, save for the wind rustling the dark shapes of the leaves above them. Off in the distance he heard a twig snap, and then another snapped closer, like something big had heard them and was moving their way.

Steve hurried over to Robin. “Yeah,” he said, “let’s go.”

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An agonized scream of pain and frustration pierced the quiet as they neared the tree line.

Steve had ratcheted up their anxiety by periodically whipping around to squint into the gloom behind them, so when they heard the shriek he and Robin dropped into a crouch like they were being fired upon.

Robin glared at him. “You go,” she whispered.

Steve inched toward the parking lot and peered around a low-hanging branch.

Billy was out of the wrecked Camaro and struggling to stand upright. His hair had been plastered to his face with sweat. His chest heaved. Black veins ran along his arms, creeping up his neck and spreading out over his cheek. Something in Steve clenched at the sight of him.

“Oh my god, that guy is really ripped,” Robin whispered, popping her head out from behind a nearby bush.

“He’s not that ripped,” Steve said automatically.

“No, he’s definitely really ripped, I can see all six of his six-pack from here.”

“Look,” Steve huffed, “Just because his muscles are all showy doesn’t mean that he’s actually that strong in practice—*shit*,” Steve hissed. “It’s the kids.”

El, Max, and Mike barreled out of an emergency exit in the back of the mall and froze when they came upon Billy’s car. He saw them same moment they saw him. Mike yelped like a scared puppy and drug a hobbling El back the way they came. Billy limped after them, gaining momentum.

“We have to do something,” Robin whispered, and broke out from behind the cover of the trees.

“No, no, don’t, I’m not going to do this again,” Steve wheezed, trying to draw her back into the woods, and then Robin started waving her

arms like she was signaling a plane.

“Hey,” she howled, “Hey, over here!”

Steve cursed and scrambled out next to her.

Billy paused. His head turned slowly to look at them. Steve went cold. There was no hint of recognition in Billy’s face, nothing human in his expression save for a dull, exhausted sort of hatred. Billy took one halting step towards them and then stopped and looked down at his foot, as though surprised it had moved. When he looked up again there was something unsure in his eyes.

Steve had just opened his mouth to say something, anything—when Max reappeared. Steve saw a flash of red hair before she flipped a switch on the gate that lay between the mall and Billy and the gate began loudly clattering closed.

Billy’s gaze swung away from Steve as if he had never existed. He turned and powered after Max without a backward glance.

“C’mon,” Robin yelled, and took off after him.

Steve spared one last longing look for the safety of the tree line before following.

They caught up with Billy in one of the service hallways in the mall. Max and Mike were slumped, unconscious, on the linoleum. Billy had a screaming El by the hair. Robin sprinted forward and leapt onto Billy’s back. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kicked at his groin with the scuffed heels of her converse.

Billy barely flinched.

He dropped El’s hair and reached up, grabbing Robin’s wrists and prising them off his throat. Then he twisted at the waist and used his momentum to fling Robin off his body. She hit the wall with a sickening thump. Billy didn’t stop, he just went after her. He picked her up like a rag doll, dug his fingers into her scalp, and smashed her head into the drywall so hard it broke the plaster. He had moved so quickly, so efficiently, that Steve stood stalled, feet away, his mouth open in shock.

Billy swung toward him and shoved Robin into his arms hard. The weight of her body knocked Steve off his feet. He crashed to the ground and his head snapped back and smacked the tile.

Billy stalked after a sobbing El. She had tried to crawl away, but not gotten very. Her wounded leg dragged behind her and left red smears across the tile. Billy caught a handful of her hair again and kept going. They disappeared around the corner and passed out of sight.

Steve pushed Robin off his legs and knelt over her on the floor. Blood oozed out of her head and soaked her uniform. Steve's hands were coated in it.

"Robin?" Steve managed. He was trembling. *Please no*, he thought.

He put his numb fingers to her neck and felt for a pulse. Nothing.

El was still screaming, the sound growing farther and farther away.

Steve had done this. If Robin hadn't followed him she wouldn't be—wouldn't be—

He staggered up, blindly. A door at the end of the hall, illuminated by the glowing red of an exit sign, caught his eye. Steve took it at a run. If he stopped moving he'd have to be sick.

He shoved through and the summer heat rolled over him. He went stumbling through the shadows at the side of the building towards the parking lot.

The headlights of the Byers' sedan illuminated Steve for a split second—long enough for Steve to get a flash of Jonathan and Nancy staring horrified through the windshield at him—and then the car hit him with a bone breaking thud. Steve went up over the hood, rolled across the roof and squeezed his eyes shut—

Steve jerked forward, the steering wheel alive under his hands and Robin screaming right in his ear.

Starcourt, the Camaro. Nancy and the Byers' sedan.

Of course, he thought.

Robin blinked at whatever expression passed across his face when he looked at her.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Steve barely registered the question. He was seeing her dead in his arms again. He sucked in a breath, his heartbeat in his ears. This was real. This wasn’t the drugs.

“If you follow me,” Steve said evenly, “I’ll tell everyone about you. Everyone.”

Robin paled under the fluorescent lights. “What?” she said. Her voice broke like a scared little kid’s.

The last time he’d heard her sound that small and frightened was when the Russians had tied them together, Steve half-unconscious and drooling. “What did you do to him?” Robin had screamed.

She cares about me, he remembered thinking.

Steve couldn’t look at her any longer.

He snapped off his seatbelt and swung himself over the driver’s side door. The mind-flayer appeared right on schedule, screeching apart the night sky.

“Go on without me,” he said to Nancy, and he made for the trees again. This time Robin didn’t follow. The sedan peeled out behind him, mind-flayer in pursuit, and the woods welcomed Steve back into their cool embrace.

After a while, from what sounded like a great distance away, Steve heard Billy make an agonized sound. He howled the exact same way he had last time—like all his anger and frustration and pain had finally ripped out of him.

Steve thought of Robin’s blood on his hands, and Max’s shirt stained black from Billy’s wounds.

He was abruptly sick all over the forest floor.

There were screams coming from the mall again. Steve dragged himself up and ran.

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2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the delay guys! I literally got pneumonia and then totaled my car in the span of two weeks, so the writing was put on hold. I'm all good now though! Updates should be more frequent.

TW: homophobia, racism, and gore

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Steve woke to the sound of someone pounding on the front door. A storm had rolled in while he slept and raindrops were tapping gently on the big picture window over the couch.

“Steve!”

Nancy. Steve groaned and buried his head under a decorative pillow. The wind continued to whip at the trees in the backyard; Steve knew from experience the surface of their pool would be littered with a fine layer of fallen leaves when the rain let up. Steve would have to fish the leaves out with a skimmer or his dad would have his ass.

Nancy went on banging. “Steve, no one has heard from you all night! I just wanna know if you’re okay. If you’re in there, please just say something.”

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. A migraine was brewing behind his swollen left eye. “Hi Nanc,” he said.

Nancy stopped knocking. “Oh thank god, Steve,” she said. The relief in her voice was palpable. Steve heard a quiet thump as Nancy rested her head against the door. “What happened last night? Where did you go?”

Steve dug a knuckle into his temple.

After escaping the parking lot, he’d trudged through the woods to the highway and then walked up the side of the road for miles, passing suburbs and empty fields. The warm asphalt had sucked at his

sneakers and brambles had shred his arms. Steve had just kept putting one foot in front of the other. *Don't think*, he'd told himself. *Don't think about how fucked you are.*

When Nancy spoke again, she sounded exhausted. "The flayer's gone. All the kids are okay, but...Hop's dead."

Steve noticed she didn't say anything about Billy. He let out a sigh that ruffled his bangs. "I'm sorry, Nancy." He meant it. "You have to go."

Steve couldn't face her. He didn't love her anymore, but he still remembered when Nancy was the loveliest thing to him, the only thing he'd ever really wanted, and seeing her looking up at him with her eyes full of concern might make him break apart. He might fall into her arms and beg her to help him, save him, fix this.

There was a pause, and then Nancy said "Okay," over the boom of a thunderclap that rattled the window panes. "If you need me, you can call. Anytime."

Steve couldn't reply to that.

After a moment, he heard Nancy hurry back the way she'd come, her shoes splashing through the puddles that formed on Steve's uneven sidewalk when it rained. A car door slammed and there was a squeal of tires. Jonathan must have been waiting for her with the motor running.

Steve exhaled.

The sun had been rising red over the horizon when Steve's house came into view.

While Steve had fumbled under the welcome mat for the spare key, he'd thought about how Robin had been with him the last two times he'd stood on his stoop. He hoped Nancy had let Robin stay the night so she wouldn't have to be by herself, but he doubted it. Robin was too proud to ask. The thought of Robin home alone after everything she'd seen...after what Steve had said...Steve's fists had clenched so hard his nails left little half-moon marks in his palms.

Once inside, he'd drawn the shades and collapsed on the couch. He hadn't turned on any lights. A numb weariness had settled over him. Steve hadn't trusted himself to shower. He hadn't even trusted himself to even go upstairs. He could slip and break his neck. Steve had decided, sometime during the neverending walk home, he'd died for the last fucking time. He could play it safe until he croaked from natural causes at ninety.

In the end, Steve hadn't even bothered to take off his filthy uniform; he'd just curled up on the cushions and passed out.

—

When Steve couldn't hear Jonathan's car anymore, he got up and retrieved a bottle of painkillers from his parents' bathroom. He checked the label twice before he popped one in his mouth and swallowed it down with water he gulped directly from the tap. His mom always hated when he did that.

Steve wondered vaguely if news of Starcourt's destruction had made it out of Indiana yet, if his parents—huddled together in some anonymous motel room—would catch a glimpse of the smoldering mall on TV and think of Steve, worry about his safety. Steve couldn't picture it.

He was out cold on the couch again within the hour.

Steve dreamed weird, jumbled up dreams—an aquarium full of giggling kids instead of fish, melting ice cream cones in January, somebody's tan legs in red swimming trunks, sleek and wet and dark.

When Steve woke up again, the sun was gone. The room was pitch black. Sleep addled, Steve thought ‘*am I dead?*’ and jerked up, terror closing his throat, his arms pinwheeling—groping for something to ground himself on. His hand brushed the back of the couch and he held on until the memory of falling asleep in the living room came back, his fingers clinging to the cushions like a life-raft while his heart rate slowed.

His face was crunchy and the eye the Russian thug had blacked wouldn't open right. He felt stupid, waking up scared stiff and filthy

on his couch. Steve smelled. He was fucking starving too, and parched.

The last time he'd eaten was in the movie theater, when he and Robin had shared that greasy bag of discarded popcorn. The memory seemed so far away now, like weeks had passed. A pang of guilt stabbed him when he thought about it. After they'd puked up the popcorn was when—she'd told him.

Steve knew about—that. He'd seen the news, right? He knew well enough that men like that, men who lived in New York and LA, places far away from Hawkins Indiana, were dying. Because of—that.

He hadn't really known that girls could be like that too. He hadn't known that girls could be like that out in bumfuck Midwestern towns, either.

As Steve shuffled into his parent's washroom, a voice in the back of his head whispered, *'Why do you think she trusted **you** with that information?'* Steve reflexively shooed the thought away like a gnat. Then he flicked on the bathroom light.

Jesus.

Steve looked wrecked. Blood was dried under his mouth and on his chin. His eye was nearly swollen shut. There was dirt all over his Scoops Ahoy uniform, and a couple of leaves tangled in his hair. He eyed the shower warily and decided to just wash himself in the sink.

Once, after a game when Steve had been sprawled on a bench in the locker room exhaustedly lacing up his trainers, he'd overheard an exchange between Tommy, who was scrubbing his pits under the the faucet, and Billy.

"Taking a whore's bath Hagan?" Billy had drawled. "That's fitting."

Steve stained three of his mom's pale blue washclothes red before he got all the dried blood off his face. He shucked off his clothes and cleaned his body with hand soap until he smelled like cucumbers and lavender.

When he was dry he snagged a pair of his dad's worn boxers and

made for the kitchen.

Steve was standing over the sink and eating a bowl of cereal, slurping milk and dripping it on his chest when the phone rang. Steve watched the receiver and idly munched his Cheerios.

His dad had invested in an answering machine the previous summer, a sleek gunmetal gray little box with a red light that flashed when the mailbox had a message. Steve used to love coming home to a voicemail from Nancy after basketball practice, but nobody called the house much anymore.

The answering machine picked up and Steve heard his fathers commanding baritone apologize for being out at the moment. A pause after the beep and then—Dustin.

“Heyyy buddy. Just callin to talk to yaaa. I’m assuming you’re home because nothing is open and half the town is dead.” Steve could picture Dustin in his cramped little dining room, twining the telephone cord around his fingers.

There was a sound like paper rustling and then Dustin’s voice came back muffled and quieter. He must have cupped his hand around the receiver so his mom couldn’t hear him.

“Steve, Lucas said you just took off last night, and Nancy told Mike she came over and you wouldn’t open the door. Is everything okay, man? I—”

His palm covered the mouthpiece.

“YEAH MOM. Just taking to Steve!...Okay!”

His voice was close and clear again. *“My mom says hi. Listen, call me back buddy. We’re all gonna meet up tomorrow and we need to get you up to speed.”*

Dustin broke off, like he was giving Steve an opportunity to pick up. Steve had never failed to pick up before.

Steve continued measuredly chewing his cereal.

“Okay, Yeah. Call me back!” Dustin chirped and hung up.

Steve replayed the message a couple of times.

“Dustin seems to believe you just about hang the stars,” Mrs. Henderson had said to Steve one night when he’d dropped Dustin home after picking him up from the arcade. Dustin had dashed off to his room to get some new gadget he wanted to show Steve, and Steve had been left in the living room with Dustin’s mother.

“Oh,” Steve had said and shifted uncomfortably.

“It’s so nice for Dusty to have a good male role model around after his dad...well.” She blew her nose noisily into a handkerchief.

“I’m just so grateful to you for being his friend. He talks about you like you’re a superhero from one of his little comic books.”

“Well, Dustin is a great little guy.” Steve had managed.

He’d wanted to say more, but hadn’t been able to get the words out. He’d wanted to tell her that Dustin was a weird kid. Weird as hell, but when Steve was around him Steve felt like a better version of himself. Dustin was counting on him, and Steve wanted to live up to Dustin’s expectations. He wasn’t watching Steve, waiting for him to slip up—to say the wrong thing, to do something that might give himself away. Dustin just...liked Steve for who he was.

Now Steve could hear the disappointment and confusion in Dustin’s voice. Steve hadn’t come through for him. Any appetite Steve had left after inhaling the bowl of cereal evaporated.

That was three people Steve had let down in the last twenty-four hours. Not a record for him, but pretty close.

His eye throbbed a dull pain in time with his heartbeat, and his feet hurt from walking all night. Steve was tired again, like he’d just played a game—not slept six hours straight. There was a crick in his neck from laying weird on the couch. *Screw it*, he thought, tossing the empty bowl in the kitchen sink with a clatter.

Steve went up the stairs on his hands and knees like a kid and tried not to dwell on how stupid he looked. The last thing he needed was to trip and break his back on the landing.

Steve's room was just as he'd left it a day—two days?—ago. He'd been late for his shift at Scoops and had thrown back the covers in a blind hurry. His comforter was crumpled at the end of the bed. A pair of gym shorts hung on the handle to the closet door. On his bedside table was the car magazine Steve had been idly paging through, its glossy pages hanging open to show a picture of a good-looking race car driver leaning against the hood of his Formula One and beaming.

Steve dry swallowed a sleeping pill he had secreted away in his underwear drawer. He'd borrowed a couple of the blue tablets from Mrs Wheeler's medicine cabinet when he and Nancy had still been dating and Steve couldn't shut his eyes without seeing the demogorgan. He hadn't needed them much lately, but he figured the events of the last couple days might trigger a backslide.

Steve collapsed onto his bed and sighed in relief. The mattress was soft and yielding and when he pulled up the duvet the comforting weight soothed his aching body. Steve drifted off staring drowsily at the picture of the NASCAR driver. The guy was tan and blonde, with soft blue eyes. He was smiling easily.

He seems nice, Steve thought blurrily. *Would look a lot cooler with an earring though.*

Sleep overtook him.

Steve woke in the middle of the day with a start. He struggled up in bed, ears straining. Light streamed in through the blinds, birds trilled outside, and something was wrong. His heart pounded in his chest. Something had woken him up. He thought he'd heard something; something had shattered the nice dream he'd been having about a girl he'd met at summer camp a couple years ago, but he was listening intently and—Nothing.

The alarm clock told him it was a little after one in the afternoon. His parents had left Steve with a hazy idea of when they'd be back—maybe next week, maybe the week after—but either way it was too early. They never came home early, and if they had cut their plans short they would have called first.

Steve rolled out of bed as quietly as he was able.

He knew he'd done this before. On more than one occasion Steve had heard a noise in the middle of the night and prowled around the house with bat in hand until he was satisfied no creature from another dimension had slithered in through the vents. Steve could admit he'd become a little paranoid. Towards the end of their relationship Nancy had flat out refused to go out with him after dark.

"You're too jumpy," she'd complained. She'd always told him it was over, that there was nothing to worry about anymore, but she'd been wrong, hadn't she and—

In the kitchen was a loose floorboard that, when stepped on, creaked loudly enough to be heard upstairs. Steve knew to avoid it when he was sneaking in. Whatever was in the kitchen clearly didn't.

Steve felt his whole body go cold. His balls shriveled up and the hair shrank back from his scalp.

The floorboard creaked again.

Steve momentarily considered going out his bedroom window, but he didn't trust himself not to go tumbling off the roof. He slid into his sneakers and grabbed a spare bat he had stashed in his closet with trembling hands.

Steve had bats hidden all over the place. He'd had always had two wooden bats in the garage from his little league days, but after facing the demogorgon he'd invested in an aluminum one. Then one night, Steve had been in the basement doing laundry when he'd heard a weird noise from above. He'd realized he was trapped down there, alone, with no weapon and no way to call for help. After he'd finally forced himself up the basement steps and found the source of the weird noise—a raccoon in the trashcan outside—Steve had bought a couple more bats and placed them strategically throughout the house. He slept a little easier with them around.

Steve tip-toed to the stairs and crept slowly down, sticking close to the bannister so he'd make as little sound as possible. His stomach churned like a shaken up soda can.

He moved through the shadows in the living room, sliding from one

piece of furniture to the next, taking cover. Steve ducked behind the stereo console and then rolled and lay flat on the far side of the ottoman. As he neared the kitchen, he heard furious whispering, more than one voice, angry, arguing.

Steve rose and slowly brough his bat aloft. His basic plan was a) bat, b) surprise?

Steve's hip knocked the entertainment center and couple of the glass figurines his mom had perched on the shelves wobbled. Steve caught one in his hand just before it fell. The voices in the kitchen went silent.

Fuck, Steve thought.

He took a huge breath and leapt into the kitchen doorway, bat over his head and hollering at the top of his lungs.

The boys huddled in the kitchen screamed.

Lucas, Will, Dustin, and Mike were all crowded around an open backpack on the floor. A steaming rotisserie chicken in a bag sat on one of the countertops. Max stood a few feet away at the back door that led into Steve's back yard. She hadn't screamed. She put a hand over her face.

"What the hell!" Steve yelled. "What are you guys doing in my house?"

Lucas and Will had the decency to look abashed.

Dustin rose unsteadily to his feet, something cylindrical clutched one hand. His face had a noble, self-righteous look to it, like Joan of Arc on the stake.

"Yeah, well," he warbled, "what are you doing in my Steve?" Dustin stabbed a finger into the gray cylinder and a green tube the length of Steve's forearm shot out of the end.

"Dude, a lightsaber?" Lucas said from the floor. He had removed his slingshot from the backpack and was calmly fitting a pebble in the sling.

Mike pulled himself up on the kitchen table. A hammer dangled from his fingers. "Hey Steve," he said sheepishly.

Will was empty handed, and looking increasingly like he thought the situation had spun out of control.

"I'm sorry, what's going on? Why do you all have weapons?"

Steve didn't feel like he could put his bat down, not with the way the boys were eyeing him. It was way too early to cope with this turn of events. Steve hadn't even had breakfast yet.

No one replied to him. Max rolled her eyes and leaned against the back door.

"They think the mind flayer possessed you," she said, sounding matter-of-fact.

Dustin whirled and glared daggers at her.

"Max!"

"What?" She shrugged. "He's obviously not possessed. He looks fine. Well. Mostly."

Steve realized he was still in his dad's saggy gray boxers and drool was crusted on his chin. He flushed.

Dustin hadn't lowered his lightsaber, but he squinted at Steve, considering. Steve plastered a sympathetic expression across his face and showed his hands, setting the bat aside to prove he wasn't a threat. Dustin had wholloped him with the lightsaber after he got it for Christmas and it had left a nasty bruise on Steve's thigh. Steve wasn't looking for a repeat performance.

Dustin said "Then why did he leave? And why haven't we heard from him?"

"I'm literally right here," Steve said. "You can just ask me."

"Well?"

Steve sagged. "I can't tell you. Something...bad happened and I had to get out of there. I don't wanna go into it—"

A pebble hit his chest and pinged off, bouncing across the floor.

"Ow!"

Steve shrank away, touching the already reddening welt.

"What the hell was that for?"

Lucas fished in his pocket.

"I got plenty more where that came from," he snapped, "Start talking."

Steve jabbed a finger at him. It was *beyond* way too early for this shit.

"I am not—"

Another pebble made contact with Steve's forehead.

"Ow goddamn it—"

Lucas pulled back on the sling and a rock caught Steve in the stomach.

"Give me that," Steve bellowed, advancing on him.

"Get back, get back," Dustin screamed and hurled the lightsaber at Steve.

The boys rushed behind the kitchen table and another rock grazed Steve's ear. Steve flung his arms over his head like he'd been taught to do during hailstorms and lifted a leg to protect his crotch.

Max had slowly started easing herself out the open door and Mike was clutching the hammer to his chest like a cross. Will crouched behind him.

"Guys, stop," he begged.

Dustin chanted "I cast you out, I cast you out!" and two more pebbles

dealt glancing blows to Steve's ribs.

"FINE!" Steve exploded, throwing out his hands in surrender, "I keep dying!"

Dustin stopped mid-yell, his mouth hanging open. Lucas paused with the sling primed and ready to shoot.

"I wake up at the mall and then we kill the flayer and I go home and die! And then it starts over again! I've done it four times! I didn't stay the other night because I'd already lived through it! I knew exactly what was going to happen!"

Dustin said "Really?" at the same time Max burst out "Prove it."

Steve made himself look away from her. Her face was still puffy from crying.

"Eleven's powers are gone, aren't they?"

Mike shifted uncomfortably.

"And Billy saved her. The flayer...got him, and then the military showed up."

"Nancy could have told him that," Lucas pointed out.

"She didn't," Mike said, firm.

No one had anything to say to that. They all stared at each other, breathing hard.

"Then why did...." Dustin trailed off.

"What?"

"Robin said you...said something awful to her," Dustin's brow furrowed. "I tried to get her to come but she said she never wanted to see you again."

Steve swallowed and looked hard at the far wall. The flowered wallpaper looked back cheerfully.

He gritted out “Something happened to her. One of the times.”

He didn’t elaborate. The boys exchanged looks. They were used to Steve being pretty tight lipped. Dustin would often kindly tell him “We can talk about things, if you ever need to.”

“I’m not saying I believe you,” Mike finally said, gently placing the hammer on the table top, “but I do believe that you believe what you’re saying.”

“But how does it work?” Dustin peered at Steve intently. “Is it a fissure in space time?”

Lucas pocketed the sling shot.

“Start from the beginning and tell us everything.”

Steve sighed and sheperded them into the living room.

Once everyone was settled on the couch he started explaining. He told them about the first time, slipping in the shower. Then the time he was electrocuted. Then hesitantly, about the last time, with Robin.

“So effectively you’re going into alternate universes,” Dustin said. His foot was bouncing furiously. “And in each one you make choices that deviate from the first universe you were in, but they all end up with you dying.”

“I mean, it all seems like the same universe to me,” Steve said, frowning. He shuffled into the kitchen to find something caffeinated to drink.

“There’s not like, blue trees or aliens or anything.”

Steve caught Mike rolling his eyes through the open kitchen door.

“He’s talking about the multiverse theory.”

Steve scrounged in the back of the pantry and pulled out a beat-up box of tea. He blew dust off the cardboard.

“Am I supposed to know what that is, or...?”

Will took pity on him and gave him the CliffsNotes version—some white coats thought there were infinite universes, all similar but differing in details.

Steve's usually tuned Dustin out when he went on a science fiction rant. The word 'theory' triggered war flashbacks to chem.

"So you think I'm what, jumping between universes?"

He filled the kettle with tap water and placed it on the stove.

"Maybe," Dustin hummed. "But the question is why? And how?"

Mike added "And why him? No offense, but wouldn't El be the best candidate? She can already move through dimensions."

Lucas sighed and stretched out on the carpet. All Steve could see of him were his skinny ankles and blue Jordan's.

"We're never gonna get anywhere with this. We're just going around in circles."

Max had been conspicuously quiet, hovering in the doorway to the living room. She broke in. "What if it's like an arcade game?"

Steve shook out a tea bag and dipped in a mug he'd filled with boiling hot water. The water turned murky and clouded. Steve blew on it distractly.

"What?"

"I mean, the principals are the same, right?" she said.

"You play the game until you die, and then it restarts."

"It's not a game, it's my life—"

"Yeah, but don't think of it like that."

Steve scoffed, carefully carrying the cup of tea back into the living room. He leaned on the wall across from Max.

"No, listen to me," Max was building steam, her face growing

animated, red braids flying.

“Listen, when you play a game, Pac-Man even, you have to play the same level over and over until you get it right. Then you can go on to the next level. If you don’t do all the things you’re supposed to do, or if you die, you don’t move on. You just restart until you get it.”

Lucas bolted up from the carpet. He broke out into a dazzling grin.

“You’re a genius,” he said.

Max flushed and looked at the ceiling.

“Is there something here I’m not getting?” Steve gurgled through a mouthful of hot tea.

“She’s saying,” Will piped up, “that you can change things.”

Steve swallowed.

“I mean, sure I can change what I do.”

“Yeah,” Dustin said from the couch with exaggerated slowness, like he was explaining a simple concept to a stupid child, “and what you do effects everything around you, right? You just said Robin died because she followed you, but she didn’t die any of the other times.”

“Riiiiiight.”

“So what if you’re supposed to do something you haven’t been doing. You’re supposed to change things. And because you haven’t been changing them, you die. Everything will keep being reset until you get it right.”

Steve shook his head forcefully.

“No, no way. What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Well you play a game until you win,” Will said. He continued slowly, like he was thinking out loud. “So what would a win be? It’s obviously not what you’ve been doing.”

“We got rid of the flayer. How is that not a win?”

“But Hopper died,” Mike said, springing up ramrod straight. A fission of excitement moved through the room.

Max added a little hoarsely “And Billy.”

Mike blinked.

“Right, yeah and Billy. So maybe there’s some way to save Hopper and Billy, and Steve is going back to the moment when he could do something to save them.”

“Yeah, like why that moment in time? It has to have some significance” Dustin mused, digging a spiral notepad out of his pocket.

“Wait,” Steve said, trying to get a handle on the conversation. He had broken out in a cold sweat.

Everyone plowed on as if he hadn’t spoken.

“Okay,” Lucas said, “so how do we save Hopper?”

Will leaned forward primly on the ottoman. “My mom would probably know. She didn’t tell me details, but she was with him last.”

“Okay, so we get your mom into this, and then we can figure out what to do so Steve is prepared when he starts over again.”

Steve pushed himself away from the wall abruptly, nerves making his movements jangily and uncoordinated.

“No. This is crazy. Starting over again is me *dying* , which none of you have done before and lemme tell you, it’s not fun. It hurts. I’m not some-some *savior* here to put everything right. They’re dead okay? I know we’re all broken up over it but Hopper is gone.”

“So were you,” Max said.

Steve stared at her. He wheeled around, the tea sloshing over the rim of mug and on to his fingers, and stared at the boys. They were all

looking up at him expectantly.

“No. I can’t do this. I’m sorry, I can’t.”

Steve made his way to the stairs and froze in front of them. He glanced back at the living room. Will was watching him pitingly. Mike, Dustin, and Lucas had their heads bent together, whispering.

Steve put the mug of tea down on the bottom step and stomped down the hall to the master bedroom.

Dustin caught the door just before Steve managed to close it.

“Steve talk to me, buddy. I’m your friend.” He peered around the jamb with his brown eyes wide and pleading like a puppy’s.

Steve dug a thumb into his temple and let him in.

“Wow this is a nice room. This is much nicer than your room. Why don’t you sleep in here?”

Steve’s parents had heavy mahogany furniture and satin sheets. There weren’t any pictures of the family up, just sterile prints of paint splashes in garish gilt gold frames. His mother kept everything so spotless it looked like a showroom. Steve thought it was the coldest place in the house.

“Dustin,” he said warningly.

“Sorry. Let’s sit.”

Dustin plopped down on the mattress and patted the spot next to him.

“Dude you’re like thirteen. What, are you gonna give me a pep talk now?”

“No. I’m your friend. I want to talk to my friend, is that okay Harrington?”

Steve rolled his eyes and sat down next to him.

"I was worried about you when you didn't answer last night," Dustin said.

Steve winced.

"I'm sorry about that—"

"No lemme finish. When I thought the flayer had got you, I-I didn't know what to do. Me and Mike and Lucas and Will..."

Dustin shook his head and looked at his knobby knees.

"It hasn't been the same. But you're always there for me. You're my best friend man."

Steve's heart, the one he'd spent the last few days freezing out, was breaking off into little shards in his chest. He bumped Dustin's narrow shoulder with his own.

"The point is, I'm not worried about you anymore. Being possessed by the flayer, that's too much for one person. But this? You can handle this. You're Steve Harrington."

Steve's mouth twisted. "Big whoop."

Dustin jumped up and looked at him in disbelief.

"Dude you're Steve-freaking-Harrington! You've faced down aliens from another dimension like three times! You beat up a Russian soldier! You can get any girl you want, and you have amazing hair. You're the coolest guy I know."

Steve was already shaking his head. "You're just a kid, you don't know. I couldn't even get into college—"

Dustin knelt and stabbed his finger into Steve's face fiercely.

"You wanna know what I know? I know that you're not scared of a fight. I know that you do the right thing, the brave thing. Whatever is happening right now is happening to you because you are the right choice. You can figure this out. I know you're scared, but when has that ever stopped you before?"

Steve ran his hands through his hair and avoided Dustin's eyes. He didn't feel brave. He felt like a terrified kid. Mrs. Henderson's words echoed in his head again and Steve felt himself relenting a little. Dustin thought he could do it. Maybe he could.

"You said this wasn't going to be a peptalk."

"Yeah well," Dustin said cheerily, "I lied. Cmon, there's nothing else you can do. If it's like you said, you're gonna die eventually. We might as well come up with a plan for the next time."

Steve couldn't argue with that logic. How long could he go before he fell in the shower again or tripped over his shoelaces?

He was trapped, and Max's theory was all they had. Steve wasn't big on video games but even he could see the logic in it. The only way out was through.

"Okay" he said finally, taking in a cleansing breath, "I'm willing to go along with this, but you guys gotta come up with an airtight plan. I'm not going back without knowing exactly what to do next."

Dustin beamed at him and slapped his back.

"We got ya buddy! We'll brainstorm and you should probably put a shirt on and brush your hair maybe? Just a suggestion."

Steve swatted at him.

When Steve, drowning in one of his dads oversized baseball tees, hair freshly combed, came out of the bedroom, the kids had split off into little factions. Dustin and Lucas were taping together pieces of printer paper to make a large poster, Mike was visible through the window, talking with his hand cupped around the walkie-talkie in the front yard, and Max and Will were packing up the backpack.

"What's happening?" Steve said, bending to retrieve the now cold cup of tea from the stairs. Dustin waved him over.

"You're gonna tell us every single thing you remember, and we're gonna write it all down. Then we're gonna get everyone else's accounts of what happened, and we'll compare."

Lucas ripped off a ribbon of tape and stuck one end of it to the back of his hand.

“That way we can get a better idea of what went wrong, and what you can do better.”

“What about them?” Steve said, nodding toward the others.

“Mike’s trying to get in contact with El, but she’s not answering. We think she might have some insight on the whole time traveling thing. Will is gonna go talk to his mom and Max has a curfew, so I think she’s going home.”

“Ah,” Steve said.

He sipped at the cold tea contemplatively. Max looked smaller than she had the day before, a seriousness to her face now. She’d always had a gravity to her, but this was deeper. It was grief, he realized.

She’d told him about Neil after they’d burned up the tunnels last year. Steve had been concussed, addled, sitting in the wet grass and watching the flames lick out of the earth. Max had come and knelt next to him.

“I’m sorry,” she’d whispered, “about Billy.”

“Wha-? S’not your fault,” Steve had said, words thick from his fat lip.

Max had looked hard at the ground and said quickly “Neil hits him.”

Steve’s brain had been mush.

“Who?”

Max cut her eyes over and glared at him, like she resented him for having to explain. “His dad.”

“Oh,” Steve had said. He watched the fire a little bit.

“Duz he hit you?” he’d slurred.

“No,” Max had said and looked at the flames too. “Just Billy.”

Steve hadn't told anybody, but he got the idea the rest of the kids knew. Max's curfews were always taken very seriously.

Steve padded over to Max and Will in the entryway.

"Thanks for, uh checking in," he said and Will smiled shyly at him.

"Sorry we scared you," Will said. He shouldered the backpack.

"I'll be back as soon as I talk to my mom."

Steve thought longingly of a Joyce Byers hug and Will hustled out the front door, into the summer sun where his bike was waiting on the front lawn. He pedaled out of sight.

Steve shifted on his feet and tried to radiate concern at Max. She raised an eyebrow at him.

"You're going home?" Steve said.

"Yeah, my mom's freaking out after...everything. I barely got to go out today."

She blew a curl out of her face and hiked the skateboard up under her arm.

"Will you...still be here tomorrow?"

Dread snaked through Steve's guts.

"Yeah," he said. "Definitely."

Max didn't look too convinced. She glanced over at Dustin and Lucas, who had their backs to them and were bickering loudly about who had the most legible handwriting, then leaned in close and pitched her voice low.

"Steve", Max said, "you'll try, right?"

"Try what?"

"You'll try to save Billy. Promise me. He's-he was an asshole but," Max squinted, her eyes shining. "He was trying to be better and-" her

throat clicked as her voice failed her.

She slumped and looked up at the ceiling. A few tears escaped and slid down her cheeks.

Steve knew Max and Billy had mostly stayed out of each other's way. Max had apparently told Lucas (who'd told the rest of the party) one night the Hargroves had been eating dinner when Neil looked up and stared Max down.

"Today," he'd said, "I saw a girl a little older than you in town. She was holding hands with a black boy. Broad daylight, in the middle of the sidewalk. Like she wanted everyone to know she was a whore. If I ever catch you doing something like that, even associating with people like that, there will be hell to pay. Do you hear me?"

"Dad," Billy had said, and Max had seen his knuckles go white from how hard he was gripping his fork, "she wouldn't do that."

Neil had quirked his lip in disgust.

"You see to it that she doesn't. It's your job to keep her away from the riffraff, like I told you."

Max and Billy had met eyes, and eventually Neil went back to his food.

After that Max and Billy had stayed out of each other's way a little less pointedly. Steve knew that sometimes when things got bad at home Max would ask Neil to let Billy take her to the arcade, just to get him out of the house. Billy occasionally dropped her off places, and when they drove up Steve could see they both almost looked like they enjoyed each other's company.

The consensus among the rest of the kids was that Billy was a rabid dog, but he'd been leashed and probably wouldn't bite any of them anymore.

Max shot a quick glance at Steve, and he got the feeling she hadn't shown anyone how bad she was hurting. There were shadows under her eyes, and this close he could see her hair was unwashed.

Steve knew he'd never been particularly impressive to Max; it was hard for him to seem like a cool older guy when she'd lived with the coolest guy in Hawkins. He was surprised she would even come to him. She had to be desperate.

"I promise," Steve said. It was a stupid promise to make.

Max gave him a look like she thought he was placating her.

"I'll do whatever I can," he said, a little more firmly, "I swear. I know we had our uhh, differences but," he shrugged.

Steve got it, family was family.

Max looked at him a moment longer and he could see a terrible sort of hope in her eyes. She looked away from him and squinted into the street. When she looked back she'd squashed the emotion from her face.

"Good luck," she said, and then she slipped out the door and was off on her skateboard.

No pressure , Steve told himself.

Mrs. Byers would show up soon and she'd tell them all what to do. Everything would be fine. He wished Robin was here.

Mike brushed past the doorframe and slouched inside, joining the other boys in front of the makeshift poster. He seemed dejected. El must not have answered.

Dustin had taped the poster to the wall next to a portrait Steve's mom had made the family pose for last year. Steve looked stiff and uncomfortable in a wool Christmas sweater and there were tight lines by his father's eyes.

Steve's stomach growled loudly.

"You guys want some snacks?" he asked.

Dustin's curly head popped out of the crowd. "Oh!" He exclaimed, "we brought you a chicken! Just in case you were possessed and we

had to tie you up.”

Mike said “Dustin thought a rotisserie chicken would curb your bloodlust.”

Steve pointedly scratched his nose with his middle finger.

He found the chicken on the countertop, broke open the bag and started separating pieces from the bone.

In the living room Mike’s voice rose.

“I’m telling you,” he whined, as Steve popped a piece of chicken in his mouth and chewed, “the first priority is keeping that freak away from El. He’s the reason she was even in danger to begin with.”

Lucas disagreed.

“No, the main priority is saving Hopper. Billy saved El, so he’s not even technically that big of a threat.”

“He literally knocked me and Max out!”

Steve crammed a couple more shreds of chicken in his mouth. The meat was dry and gummy but Steve didn’t care. He was hungrier than he thought.

“Look, what if we just made sure Billy never even got in the mall?” Dustin soothed.

Steve sucked in a breath to ask how they proposed to do that, and the half-chewed chicken shot to the back of his throat. It lodged in his windpipe.

“Hrrk” Steve managed.

“Oh yeah, Steve can just ask the terminator to stay in his car,” Mike sniped.

Steve’s hands wrapped around his throat. He could feel his face purpling. He stumbled for the living room and caught himself on the doorframe. No one was looking in his direction.

“You have a better idea, Wheeler?”

Lucas grabbed a marker and started scribbling on the poster.

“I told you Lucas, I’m the one who writes on here!”

Dustin seized Lucas’ skinny wrist.

“You write like a six year old! Let me do it!”

Steve waved his hands to get their attention right when Mike’s walkie talkie crackled to life. A distorted voice came through and said something unintelligible.

“El!” Mike cried.

Static.

“We might be able to get her outside.”

He ran for the front door, calling her name, and Lucas and Dustin followed.

Steve tried to stumble after them but his strength was failing. He sunk to his knees. His lungs were on fire and black spots floated in his vision. Drool slid down his chin.

No , he thought.

Steve hadn’t choked on food since he was five and had gotten an ice cube down the wrong pipe at dinner. His dad had been telling him repeatedly not to chew ice for weeks, and Steve had always ignored him. When Steve had started to choke his dad had sat calmly at the dinner table, dabbed his mouth with a napkin, and watched him. Steve had been half blind with terror, cheeks hollowing as he tried to take in air.

“What did I tell you, Steve?” his dad said. Steve’s mom had come in from the kitchen, taken in the scene, and whacked Steve on the back. The ice cube had shot out of his mouth and bounced off the wall. He’d watched it melt into the carpet through his tears.

No mommy to save him now.

Steve was dimly aware of his body slumping down onto the hardwood floor, back hitting the ground with a loud smack, the popcorn ceiling above him visible through a haze of darkness.

Dustin's voice called from the front of the house, sounding light years away.

"Hey Steve?"

Steve's heart rate stuttered in his chest and his bladder released.

The last thing Steve saw before he kicked the bucket was Dustin's face leaning over his.

"Oh fuck," Dustin said.

—

Steve jerked forward, the steering wheel alive under his hands and Robin screaming right in his ear.

Starcourt again. The Camaro in flames.

Steve took a calming breath and then slammed his palms flat on the console.

"Ahhhhh" he screamed.

The car radio flicked on. A disc jockey on Hawkin's local station whose whiny voice Steve hated purred "...and now we're gonna play Hannah's pick. She dedicates this song to her boyfriend, who she hopes will be proposing soooooon..."

Robin had flinched violently when he yelled. She grabbed onto the leather headrest and braced herself on the dash with her other hand, looking almost comically disgruntled.

"Dude, *w hat*?"

Steve's throat was scraped raw. All of that for nothing. Even eating

wasn't safe. He swung out of the car and bowled onto the pavement.

"Get out, he snapped over his shoulder, "the flayer is coming."

Right on cue, the monster rose up from behind the roof of the mall. Robin stared bug-eyed up at the flayer and scrabbled frantically at the car door. She stumbled out of the TODFTHR, tripping over her converse, and lurched towards the Byers' sedan.

Robin had the trunk unlatched and one leg in when she realized Steve wasn't following her. She swung around and looked back at him.

"Go without me," Steve called. He didn't need to look around to know the flayer was clambering over the roof, coming closer. Nancy was visible through the back windshield motioning frantically for him.

" *What?* "

"Do you trust me?" He hadn't know he was going to say that. Robin was lit up red from the glow of the brake lights. There was a smear blood on her cheek, his maybe. Steve wondered why he'd ever thought he had a crush on her. She was his best friend.

"I d-"

An earsplitting screech from the flayer cut her off.

"Go!" Steve yelled, backing towards the woods.

Robin gave him one last concerned look before she lunged into the back of the sedan and it veered off, trunk swinging closed on the frightened faces staring at him from the car.

Steve sprinted for the treeline. The flayer leapt from the roof and slammed to the ground, crushing the TODFTHR behind him, the concussion from the impact knocking Steve off his feet. He hit the concrete hard, skinning his palms, but was up again in an instant and running, not bothering to check if the flayer had spotted him. He made it to the trunk of a towering oak, skidding on fallen leaves, and crouched down.

“Fuck,” Steve hissed, and rubbed his stinging hands together.

The radio was still playing in the crushed convertible. The music floated eerily across the parking lot, like a calliope playing in an empty carnival.

The flayer paused, its gargantuan head swinging in the direction Steve had run. Steve held his breath.

There was a beat when he thought the monster was going to come for him, that he was going to die bad, really bad this time, and then the sedan’s tires squealed through a wild turn at the light and the sound caught the flayer’s attention. It forgot Steve and darted after the car.

Steve breathed out and slumped into the dirt. He was alone, with no plan, again. He scrubbed a hand over his face. Dustin had been talking out of his ass.

Steve was too stupid for this.

He tried to remember what the kids were talking about before he choked to death. It seemed unbelievable that Steve had just been in his own home, had slept in his own bed. He was grimy and sweat soaked again. If he ever got out of this he promised himself he’d burn the Scoops uniform.

“Yeah yeah okay,” he muttered, running his fingers through his hair, “Think.”

The chicken. He’d been eating the bone dry chicken. He almost gagged at the memory.

Focus, you gotta focus. Head in the game, Harrington.

Mike had said something about Billy. Something about not letting him get to Eleven.

Right, that made sense. Steve guessed Billy finding El was the reason the flayer stopped chasing the sedan and turned back for the mall. Stop Billy and the mind flayer wouldn’t have any reason to get near Starcourt.

Sure, Steve could do that. Billy had beat Steve to a pulp before, but now he was hurt. He'd been limping last time. Sure. Steve could maybe do it.

He stayed crouched down.

Steve remembered what it was like to have Billy whaling on him. The hardwood floor in Joyce Byers' living room cold under his back and Billy's face contorted with rage above him. It was just a snippet of a memory; Steve had lost parts of that night after the beating, fuzzy impressions that came back only when prompted, if they came back at all. Sometimes the one of the kids would bring something up and Steve would say *huh?* and they would get a solemn, patient look on their face and gently remind him.

Once he'd been trying to tell Lucas, Mike, and Dustin off for taking a shortcut home through the woods after heavy rain. Steve had only meant to warn them about that part of Hawkins—it usually flooded, and in the dark they could misjudge how deep the streams were.

“Why the hell are we even listening to him?” Mike had snapped, “He has brain damage.”

Later Dustin had gravely told Steve Mike was full of shit, but Steve had privately thought Wheeler might be right.

His attention span had always been bad but it had gotten worse, and his memory wasn't worth crap. He'd read those were symptoms of stress too, but Steve didn't think the stuff with the demogorgons effected him that much. He'd always been good at rolling with the punches.

Steve's legs didn't want to uncurl from the ground.

He peeked around the tree trunk and squinted at the Camaro. The fire on the car's windshield was smouldering and sending thin rivets of smoke into the night sky, reminding Steve of that book Christine, with the evil possessed Plymouth—except now the thing inside the car was evil.

As Steve watched the figure behind the wheel stirred. The head lifted

and the body righted itself. Shit.

Steve scrounged around in the dirt. The car door shook, then flew open.

Steve's hand closed around a thick branch. He stood and hurriedly snapped little twigs off the bark until the limb was mostly smooth. It was heavy in his hand. Steve swung it experimentally.

Billy's booted foot stepped out of the car, the silver buckle winking in the darkness. Steve felt his heart rate kick up.

He didn't think, just moved, forcing himself steadily across the lot.

Billy's finger's wrapped around the top of the car door. He heaved himself out of the Camaro with a scream. Billy stumbled and caught himself on the side of the car, back against the side window, chest heaving. The drivers door swung closed. Steve was halfway to him now, his palms sweating.

For a moment Billy's shoulders slumped like the weight of the world was on his back. The radio was still playing from the crumpled TODFOTHER, Phil Collins begging his lover for one more night. Time stretched, Steve feeling the music like an echo through his chest, seeing Billy with his head bowed, like he was praying, or weeping.

Then Mike, Max, and El came barreling out of the back of the mall, looking like the half-wild kids from Lord of The Flies. Steve cursed. He'd forgotten about them.

"Get back inside," he yelled as Billy's head turned in their direction.

The kids froze, Max's eyes locked on her brother.

Steve sprinted forward, closing the gap between him and the Camaro. He stopped ten paces away from Billy and planted his feet, branch in his hands and raised like a bat.

"Hey," he yelled.

No response.

Billy dragged himself towards the front of the Camaro, using the roof of the car as a handhold. The muscles rippled in his back as he pushed himself off the car and stood up straight, face as still as a dead man's.

"Hargrove!" Steve tried again.

Still nothing. Mike regained his grip on Eleven's waist and whirled her around. Max's face was white, mouth open in horror. Steve remembered his promise to her with a clarity that felt like a slap.

"Hey asshole!" Steve screamed, "look at me!"

Still nothing. Billy's attention zeroed in on the kids, stumbling over each other to escape back into Starcourt.

Hargrove had done a lot of shit to Steve, but he'd never ignored him before. Steve felt a shiver of rage roll through him.

"I said, look at me! Look at me!"

Steve knelt and grabbed a rock off the ground. He pitched it at Billy and hit him square in the kidneys.

Billy finally stopped in his tracks. He turned around and looked at Steve.

Steve wished he hadn't.

Billy was a sickly color in the blue light from the mall's neon lights, skin glistening with a fine sheen of sweat. Black veins stood out on his skin like tattoos. His eyes were bloodshot and there were tear streaks in the grime on his face. He looked inhuman.

"Oh shit," Steve said.

The music on the TODFTHR's radio faded away, and the high whine of the DJ broke in— "We've got some reports that strange things are happening in Hawkins tonight. We're not sure what's going on, but everyone here in the K Love station is doing just fine. We hope you are too. Here's a little song to keep your spirits up!"

The opening chords to Elton John's "I'm Still Standing" wafted over to them, carried by the wind.

Billy's head swiveled mechanically towards the source of the music. He blinked at the TODFTHR and then turned slowly back to Steve, the corner of his mouth twitching up. He looked like a corpse with an inside joke.

Steve involuntarily took a step back, and Billy's mouth flattened out. He was cold, robotic again.

"Wait, wait, wait," Steve stalled.

Billy began slowly advancing, like a lion with prey in sight. Steve had to hop backwards to put more space between them.

Elton John sang out "Don't you know, I'm still standing," and Billy lunged.

Steve sprang away and brought the branch down in an arc, catching Billy on the shoulder with a crack that reverberated up the length of the wood and shook Steve's hands. Billy didn't even flinch; Steve might as well have hit him with a foam pool noodle. He shot out an arm and grabbed the branch, wood splintering under his grip.

Steve held onto his end of the limb with both hands, bark flaking off on Steve's palms. Billy reached over, grasped the middle of the branch, and without ceremony stomped on Steve's foot.

Pain exploded through Steve's crushed toes. He gasped and stumbled off balance, Billy using his momentum to yank the branch and pitch Steve into his chest.

Billy's smelled singed, like burned hair and gasoline. His tank-top was damp with perspiration. Steve reeled back, blinked at the grim line of Billy's mouth and Billy smashed his forehead into Steve's nose.

There was a sickening crunch. Steve saw stars and Billy followed up with a punch, his fist glancing off the side of Steve's face.

Heat blossomed in the side of Steve's head and something popped in his ear. He heard a tinny ringing sound, like a dial tone that went on

and on.

Steve went down hard, still gripping the branch.

Billy loomed over him and Steve mindlessly raised the branch up between them, like a talisman.

Billy wrapped his fingers around the limb and held it steady. He picked up his boot. Steve saw the Harley logo engraved on the sole right before Billy drove it into Steve's ribs. Steve screamed, and Billy pulled the branch from his slack fingers. He tossed it away across the parking lot.

As Steve's vision cleared again, Billy bent over, his hands on his knees. He was panting.

Steve tried to drag himself away over the pavement, his fingers bloodying on the rough rock. *Bad idea. Bad idea.*

"Forget it," Steve groaned, a bubble of blood blowing out of his nose, "just-just go in the mall."

Billy straightened and seized Steve by his skinny ankles, walking back towards his Camaro and towing Steve along behind him. Billy's grip was like iron. Steve craned his neck around and watched the branch grow further and further away from him.

Billy let go of him by the back wheel of the car and wrenched open the trunk. Steve scrambled up into a seated position. The ride over the cement had skinned up his back, and he felt dizzy and nauseous. He looked around for some sort of weapon.

Billy glanced down at him, snatched Steve by the collar and punched him three times in quick succession.

Steve was on the pavement again, vision fading in and out. Billy's boot-clad feet were all Steve could see of him.

Steve stared fuzzily under the Camaro and watched something drip from the undercarriage. The fluorescent parking lot lights glinted off a faintly shimmering puddle of oil. *Pretty*, Steve thought.

Billy walked back to the trunk and rummaged around in it. He grabbed something, then set it down next to Steve. He went back to the trunk.

Billy was moving gingerly, like he was injured, even though he didn't seem to be showing it any other way. He hummed along to "I'm Still Standing" softly under his breath.

Billy searched for something in the trunk again, feeling around for a moment, then came up empty-handed.

Steve groaned through a mouth that felt like all its teeth had been broken out. He squinted up at Billy with his one good eye.

"Elton John, really?"

Billy ignored him and kept humming. He knelt over Steve and picked up whatever it was he'd set down.

A rope. He must have been looking for a gag to go with it.

Steve thought about struggling, but everything hurt. He didn't have any fight left in him. This time was a wash. He wished Billy would just kill him and get it over with so Steve's shattered nose would stop aching.

Billy grabbed Steve's wrists and bound them with scratchy threadbare rope. Steve flexed experimentally. The rope bit into his skin, the fibers sharp like little blades.

Billy got a arm under Steve's upper body and hoisted Steve over his shoulders with a soft grunt. Steve's head bounced around sickeningly and the world spun.

"Oh god," he moaned, "I'm gonna be sick."

"Don't be afraid," Billy said woodenly.

"I'm not afraid, you asshole. I just got the shit kicked out of me."

Billy started towards the mall and Steve obligingly passed out.

He came to again when Billy stopped in front of the closed automatic gate, which sealed the side of the mall off from the parking lot. Max must have shut it when Steve was busy getting creamed.

Billy's hand was on Steve's back, holding him steady on Billy's broad shoulder. His other hand was attempting to pull the gate open. He didn't seem to want to let go of Steve to do it. Steve's head spun from hanging upside down.

"S'ok," He slurred.

He fisted his bound hands in Billy's stained wife-beater. "Go 'head."

Billy paused, like he was caught off-guard, and Steve saw his cheek turn towards Steve's body.

His warm hand left Steve's back and went to the gate. He tensed. The metal groaned and screeched as Billy slowly pried the frame apart. Steve thought even the flayer-fueled preternatural strength wouldn't be enough to bend the metal, but it finally gave. Steve suppressed the insane urge to say "You got it!"

Billy's hand came back to steady Steve, his touch light but firm.

Steve found himself wondering absently if Billy had ever thrown Max over his shoulder like this, both of them laughing, Billy playing the part of the rough-housing older brother and Max the put-upon little sister. Maybe before they'd moved to Hawkins.

"He was nicer back in California," Max had said once.

Steve was so lost in his thoughts he didn't notice they were in the mall until Mike yelled something and Billy back-handed him. Steve heard the sound of him smacking the tile.

Max was pleading out of sight, her voice breaking, and Steve flinched when Billy struck her.

"Don't be afraid" Billy said again in that hollow sounding voice. This time Steve didn't say anything back.

He stared behind them at Max's motionless body while Billy stalked

down the hall. Max must have remembered this happening when she'd asked Steve to save Billy. Steve wondered when she'd become so loyal to him.

By the sound of things, Billy had reached El. Steve heard her scream for Mike over and over, like a siren, until Billy took her roughly by the hair. He hauled her along the corridor. Steve looked down cross-eyed and met El's wild rolling eyes. She stared up at him in terror.

"Hi," Steve mumbled. Blood from his nose dripped down and plopped on her forehead. She started screaming again.

Billy eventually brought them into the atrium, his steps echoing through the empty building. Steve thought it was weird to see the food court without the mind flayer thrashing wildly in the middle of it and breaking the place apart. The silence was eerie.

Billy gently set Steve down on the tile in front of the mall's only Italian restaurant. Steve sometimes got greasy slices of pizza there during his lunch break.

El twisted in Billy's grip as the ground began to shudder, her face screwing up in a mask of fear and rage.

Steve had his foot up to kick Billy in the crotch when the flayer burst through the skylight. Glass blasted down in flashing sheets and exploded like sparking confetti.

Billy gripped El by the shirt and pulled her forward. She went, arms outstretched and reaching for Steve.

Steve tried to grab for her with his bound hands and his ribs screamed in protest. He went limp. He was too tired, he couldn't help, he didn't want to watch this again. But he did.

Steve watched as the flayer opened its hideous mouth and roared, a putrid blast of hot air hitting Steve full in the face. He watched as Nancy appeared over the balcony like an avenging angel and hurled down the first firework. The rest of the fire-crackers followed in a volley of blue and red flares, filling up the mall with smoky hot air. His eyes stung and watered, and each breath felt laborious. The

racket was deafening. The boom of the fireworks mixed with the mind flayer's screeches of pain to make a wall of sound so loud Steve's ear bled.

Steve stayed as still as possible and kept his eyes on the two figures in the middle of the fray. Something had started happening.

Billy was pinning El to the ground, hunched over her small body, when El started to talk. Her mouth was trembling, and Steve couldn't hear what she was saying over the cacophony, but she was speaking just for Billy. Her shaking hand touched his cheek. The black veins snaking up Billy's forearm and temple slid away, his skin turning rosy again. He shut his eyes.

For a moment everything fell away, all sound, the flayer flimsy and far away like a cardboard cutout, and there was only Steve's breath snagging and snagging in his throat.

Billy turned his head, his curls falling across his face, and looked right at Steve. There was an expression on his face Steve couldn't read, but Steve knew he was Billy again, the real one. Abusive asshole maybe, but human. Steve could only stare unblinkingly at him.

Billy turned away, rising unsteadily to his feet, and Steve could breathe again, and the flayer was real again and people were shouting and there was an acrid stench in Steve's nose and—

Billy caught the flayer's tentacle out of the air with a pained gasp.

Steve shut his eyes for the rest of it, the sound of Billy being taken apart muted through the whistling in Steve's ear. He gritted his teeth when the flayer collapsed, the windows rattling from the impact.

Steve kept his eyes closed until Max stumbled past him to Billy's side, and this time Steve heard Billy rasp to her "Sorry...sorry." He sounded like a scared little boy. Steve had never imagined he could sound like that.

Billy took a last rattling breath and died. If Steve had wanted to he could have watched the light fade from his eyes.

El and Mike wrapped Max, sobbing, up in their arms. Steve rolled over onto his hands and knees and propped himself up. Steve's whole chest hurt—not just his ribs—like an ice pick had jabbed through the middle of him.

The expression on Billy's face when he'd looked over replayed on a loop in Steve's head. Billy had seemed...resigned maybe. Exhausted. Something else too, almost like he was drowning in the middle of the ocean, looking at a life preserver just out of reach.

Robin yelled Steve's name from the second floor. Steve looked blindly up for her and a chunk of metal railing damaged in the firefight let go from the balcony over his head.

"Shit," Steve said, before it brained him.

—

Steve jerked forward, the steering wheel alive under his hands and Robin screaming right in his ear. He bent over the wheel for a moment and squeezed it hard.

He had it now. He got it.

A helpless, incredulous smile spread across Steve's face.

A fucking plan. Finally.

Steve whirled and grabbed Robin by the shoulders.

"Go with Nancy, okay? Trust me."

Robin looked blank with confusion, addled by the wreck and his giddy mood.

Steve almost laughed at her expression, but instead nodded in what he hoped was a stately and firm way at her. He leapt over the car door and sprinted for the mall, his sneakers crunching on the concrete. He didn't look back for the flayer or bother to watch the Byers' car tear off; Steve only paused to slam the bright red button on the automatic gate and close it behind him.

Billy's Camaro was visible through the bars, lit up wickedly by the

flames crawling out from under the hood. Billy was motionless.

Steve took off again, a little less confidently.

He almost collided with Mike, El, and Max on their way out of the emergency exit.

“Steve?” Max said skidding to a halt.

Steve doubled over panting.

“Hey guys,” he wheezed at their weary faces, “I have a plan.”

Mike took the most convincing.

Even after Steve had explained everything as well as he could, Mike alternated between glaring at Steve and shooting uneasy looks at El’s curly head.

El had only nodded when Steve told them his idea and put her hand on his.

“His plan is good,” she’d said gravely, ending the discussion.

Max banged back through the exit door, night air rushing in with her, her face flushed and eyes wide.

She puffed “Okay, I got Billy’s attention. He’s headed this way,” and everyone hesitated. Steve felt a thread of trepidation crawl through his gut. They didn’t have much time.

Mike threw his arms around El and then he, Max and Steve retreated into the atrium. Steve got the kids to their places, then doubled back and poked his head back around the corner. He looked down the hallway at El sitting alone, cross-legged on the tile.

“This’ll work,” he promised. She ducked her chin at him.

Mike and Max were huddled together on the far side of a pillar. When Steve glanced in their direction, Mike called “If anything happens to her, I’ll kill you.”

“Just remember what I told you,” Steve yelled back.

Max gave him a thumbs up and Steve scuttled off to crouch behind a potted plant. He picked a vantage point where he could keep an eye on the kids through the polyester leaves.

Steve’s palms were sweating. Crazy. He was crazy, this was crazy. But he was doing something, not hiding or being pulled along for the ride.

Steve didn’t have long to wait.

Billy appeared in the doorway to the food court with a brave-faced El in tow. He looked around briefly, as if anticipating an ambush. When none came, he took El roughly by the collar and yanked her forward. Steve saw Mike tense.

“Don’t,” Steve hissed.

Mike shot a look at him and Steve made a quelling motion with his hands.

“Wait,” he mouthed.

The ground began to shake. Gently at first, vibrations so minute as to almost escape notice. The shaking became a trembling, then a quaking. Utensils fell off the walls in the darkened restraunts and display cases crashed to the ground. Steve braced himself.

With a thunderous crash like a hundred mirrors shattering at once, the mind flayer broke through the skylight and landed in the middle of the atrium. Glass flew in all directions.

Steve heard Max scream and Mike clapped a hand over her mouth.

Steve started counting in his head—4...5...6...

When he hit ten, the first firework clipped the flayer’s side and exploded in a blinding red and blue flash. The monster howled and knashed it’s teeth, and fireworks began raining down in earnest.

Billy winced with every blow to the monster’s hide. He roared in pain

and slammed El into the tile. She gasped and writhed in his grip.

Mike vibrated in Steve's peripheral vision. He held up on finger in Mike's direction and counted on Max to hold him back. Wait.

Cmon, Steve thought, *c'mon*.

El opened her mouth to speak, talking slowly, gently, and Billy changed, exactly like he had last time. Like he must have changed all those other times too, a real boy again.

Mike and Max were watching, stunned.

Billy struggled up from the ground and Steve shouted "Now!"

Mike was ready. He and Max streaked across the tile and grabbed El by her arms. They pulled her back towards the pizza joint, her wounded leg dragging uselessly behind her.

A tentacle shot after them. Billy caught it out of the air and Steve started moving.

He was almost too late.

A second tentacle jabbed into Billy's side and Steve lunged, slamming into him and knocking Billy off his feet. Steve felt another tentacle whistle just over the back of his Scoops uniform.

His hands wrapped around Billy's waist and Steve's momentum brought the two of them down hard a few feet away. Steve landed on Billy's bony ribs and scrambled up on to his hands and knees. Billy was under him, hurt but alive. Breathing.

Steve felt elation surge through his veins. He'd done it, he'd done something, changed something. He looked down at Billy.

"Next time," Billy said, staring resignedly past Steve's head at something behind him.

Steve felt the grin slide off his mouth. "What?" he said.

Billy opened his mouth and a tentacle punched through Steve's chest.

Blood splattered Billy's white face. Someone howled an agonized "No!" from the second floor balcony.

Billy grabbed Steve's shoulders, leaned forward and said something in Steve's ear. Steve couldn't process his words. Someone was screaming his name. The tentacle through Steve's chest began retracting back into the flayer's body, bringing Steve along with it.

Billy held on to his arms for a moment, fighting the flayer's pull, looking at Steve like he needed to know he'd been heard.

Steve's mouth wasn't working right. Billy's eyes were bluer than Steve had ever seen them and Steve's blood was saturating Billy's tank top. Steve looked at the widening stain and slurred "Sssry." A muscle jumped in Billy's jaw. The tentacle gave another backwards tug and Billy let go of him.

Steve lifted off the tile and into the air, blood running out of his mouth in a thin stream, and he heard himself making little involuntary "uhuhunh" choking noises. The flayer shrieked, the sound deafening in Steve's ears. Fear broke through Steve's shock and wrapped icy fingers around his heart.

If the flayer ate him, would he still come back?

Steve tried to get a grip on the tentacle sticking out of him but his hands were too slick from his own blood. His legs felt encased in concrete. Robin screamed for him, and when he turned his head towards the sound of her voice a tentacle flew at his face.

The last thing Steve saw was a thousand sharp and reaching fangs, like a horror movie jump-scare, like every nightmare Steve had ever had.

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3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks to everyone who has stuck with me so far!
Your comments mean so much to me, if you like this fic please let me know what you think in the comment section <3

This chapter was a real struggle to write but this fic will NOT be abandoned

Happy Holidays everyone!

Steve jerked forward, the steering wheel alive under his hands and Robin screaming right in his ear.

“Oh god”, Steve said and nearly choked. His hands flew to his shirtfront and splayed flat on his ribcage. No gaping wound, no wriggling tentacle—Steve was whole, intact.

“Oh god,” he said again. He was shaking. He couldn’t stop.

“Hey, dude, are you alright?”

Steve chanced a look at the passenger seat and found Robin staring at him, her eyes round and beady like a concerned mother hen’s. The portion of Steve’s brain currently not freaking out idly noticed the freckles dusting her nose were so dark she looked like she’d been splattered with mud.

She needs a baby wipe, he thought, and remembered he had a package of Huggies in the glove compartment of his car. He’d kept them stashed there for Dustin. The kid got surprisingly dirty, and Steve couldn’t let his grimy fingers smudge up the leather interiors. Ergo, the wipes.

Steve *was not* a babysitter. He was just...practical.

He stifled a hysterical noise bubbling up his throat, afraid it might sound more like a sob than a laugh.

“Are you hurt?”

Robin’s hand hovered tentatively over his shoulder, like she didn’t particularly want to touch him, but thought she might have to. Steve remembered how bad his reflection had looked on the nights he made it home, and couldn’t really blame her. He was coated in maybe three different people’s blood, a healthy smattering of dirt, and his own puke. His uniform smelled like it’d been used to wipe down a bus stop bathroom.

The flayer appeared on the Starcourt roof with a resounding crash, its massive body a dark silhouette against the midnight blue of the night sky. It blasted the parking lot with a defeating screech. The sound seemed to go on and on, like ten thousand car alarms in the same city going off at once. Steve’s arms prickled with goosebumps, and the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

“ ‘gotta go,” Steve gasped, swinging open his door and stumbling out. He reached back blindly for Robin and hauled her out of the car, moving too fast, so she tripped and lurched into his chest. Her hair brushed his face and Steve smelled the freezer burn smell of the Scoops storage fridge. They both smelled like it, he realized. His body had been at work that morning, slinging ice cream and plotting with Dustin, while his mind went around and around through time like the only passenger in a runaway tilt-a-whirl.

Then he remembered.

Maybe not the only passenger.

Steve shoved Robin in the direction of the sedan. “Go with Nancy,” he rasped, his throat raw like it had been the couple of times he’d cheered himself hoarse during one of Tommy’s games.

“You’re not coming—?”

Steve opened his mouth to say something, his eyes darting over Robin’s head at the flayer, and a memory of the tentacle jabbing through his chest hit him like a sucker punch. One moment Steve was in the parking lot with flop sweat beading under his pits, and the next Steve’s feet were lead weights—he could feel his lungs

shriveling, his blood boiling in his mouth, Billy's breath hot on his ear—

“Steve, come on!” The steel in Nancy's voice cut through the past like a blade. Steve came back to himself.

Robin had stopped in front of the TODFTHR, the headlights illuminating her skinny legs and scraped knees. She reached for his hand and the sedan's motor revved, a wordless signal for Steve to hurry the fuck up, *now*. Will's wide eyes glinted at him from the back seat.

Steve wanted to get in the car so badly it felt like a physical need.

On the roof the flayer tensed, readying itself to spring.

“Go with Nancy,” he said again, tasting the blood in his mouth, and spun around on his heel.

-

The night air was a couple degrees cooler under the trees. Steve took huge gulping breaths of it while he rested his cheek against the peeling trunk of a Virginia Pine. Around him were little forest sounds—crickets chirping, the odd twitter as a bird shifted in its nest, the wind rustling through the leaves above his head.

“Okay!” Steve bellowed. Everything went quiet. Steve shoved himself off the tree, shook his arms out, and clapped his hands over his face. He puffed out a sigh and started pacing, his sneakers wearing a path through the dirt and fallen leaves. His mind would drift to what he needed to do and then skitter away like a frightened mouse.

“Okay!” Steve said again and ran his fingers through his hair until it stood on end. A toad blinked at him reproachfully. Steve edged around an oak at the lip of the woods and peered at the burning Camaro. Billy was draped motionless over the wheel, his body just visible through the cracked windshield. Steve looked at his watch, then retreated a few feet back into the tree cover.

“I'm just saying,” he muttered, and flung his arm out for emphasis at the toad, “I don't have to do this. I don't *have* to do this. Should I get

eaten for Billy Hargrove? No, I shouldn't."

"I," Steve said and gestured to himself, "am a good person. Other people," he made a hand motion that encompassed the mall behind him, "are good people. Billy Hargrove is—"

An asshole, he was going to say. An asshole who had saved El from being eaten by an evil face-sucking alien, and who might be the only person in the world who could help him.

Steve balled up his fists and pressed them into his eyes so hard he saw starbursts of orange and blue. Billy's face swam out of the darkness behind Steve's lids, sporting the cool, intent look he'd worn in the mall. *Did you hear me Harrington? Did you hear what I just said?*

Billy Hargrove had said "Next time." The words clanged around Steve's head like a funeral toll.

"Fuck!" Steve screamed and startled a group of sparrows into flight. The toad rolled its bulbous eyes at him reproachfully and hopped off.

"Fine," Steve said. His palms were sweating. "That's just fin—"

Steve doubled over and puked bile on the forest floor. He came up wiping his mouth. *You're okay*, he told himself, and imagined the words coming out of Nancy's mouth.

A sound reached him, faint but unmistakable, metal on metal. A car door scraping open.

"Fuck," Steve moaned and took off out of the trees at a sprint. He pounded across the pavement and drew alongside the Camaro just as Billy pulled himself upright. His back was to Steve, dark veins threading over his shoulders and pulsing in his spine.

Steve slowed, jogged in place, and said haltingly "Hargrove?"

Billy turned a blank and watery glare on him. There was no recognition in his face, no shadow of humanity. He had the flashing eyes of an animal in a trap.

Right. That would be too easy, Steve thought wildly. He mindlessly

shot a thumbs up at Billy and picked up his pace again. Steve booked it through the automatic gate, mashing the button to close it with his elbow as he passed.

He caught the kids on their way out the back door. They retreated into the hallway after one look at him, and Steve followed after a nervous glance towards the parking lot.

Convincing Mike and Max was even harder the second time around. Steve was breathless and he smelled like vomit. He kept stuttering, flinching at every sound, sure Billy or the flayer were going to come crashing in any second. Steve could see in their faces he was scaring them. Finally he gave up and turned to El.

“Please,” he said. “They’ll listen to you.” She looked from his pleading eyes to the exit sign and back again.

God, he didn’t want her to agree to it. Steve wanted to run and never look back.

“Please,” Steve repeated, not knowing why he was begging even as he did it. All he knew was that he had to do this. He had to. El took Mike’s hand. She nodded.

Everything happened quickly after that. Steve bullied a protesting Max and Mike into their hiding spots from the last time they’d all done this whole shebang and had just ducked behind a massive hydrangea when Billy appeared in the doorway to the food court. He had a bruising grip on El’s arm. Steve steeled himself.

The flayer came crashing through the skylight, the fireworks went off in a cacophony of explosions, and Billy slammed El to the ground. The flayer roared, thrashing in the middle of the atrium, it’s tentacles flattening chairs and smashing through store windows.

Steve rose into a crouch, like a runner on a starting block. His ears tuned out everything but the tick of the second hand on his watch. *Tick.* El’s hand caressing Billy’s face. *Tick.* Billy’s welling eyes sliding closed. *Tick.* The dark veins on Billy’s face melting away. *Tick.* Billy standing up.

“Go!” Steve howled, and Max and Mike ran as one, racing across the tile and grabbing El’s outstretched hands. The flayer’s black and writhing tentacle shot towards her and Steve moved. He felt his arms pumping, sweat rolling down his back, the flayer a blur off to his side.

In his head Steve was back the night before, impaled and choking on blood, Billy’s mouth at Steve’s ear.

“Next time,” he’d whispered, *“roll us to the right.”*

A second tentacle whipped under Billy’s arms and sunk its fangs deep into his side, and Steve lunged. Billy’s scream of pain choked off into a grunt as Steve tackled him, the two of them hitting the linoleum hard. Steve hooked a leg around Billy’s thighs and rolled them fast to the right, the tile cold and unforgiving on his spine. He lifted his head just in time to see a tentacle jab the ground where they’d been only seconds before. The force of the tentacle crumpled the ground like it was made of egg shell.

Steve’s heartbeat felt rabbit quick in his chest. He got his feet under him and fumbled at Billy’s shoulders. Billy came up easily, his hands clinging to Steve’s shirtfront, and Steve hauled him back under the awning.

The flayer roared in frustration, the sound so loud it shook the ground under Steve’s sneakers, and Steve kept them moving, backing up and knocking over the flimsy food court tables, stumbling over debris, his eyes on the twisting tentacles. The flayer screeched again and began ponderously dragging itself up. Billy made a low sound next to him. Steve saw the mouth of a hallway in his peripheral vision and jerked Billy into it.

Billy’s feet went out from under him almost immediately. He wrenched out of Steve’s grip and slid down the wall with a gasp. Blood flowed heavily from three round holes directly under his ribcage and puddled on the tile. The wounds were deep and ugly.

Steve knelt in front of him, panting.

“That looks bad,” he said.

Billy's snorted, his eyes squeezed shut, like a horse shooing away a fly that buzzed too close. "Can barely feel it," he bit out.

Steve looked up sharply. There were tear tracks in the grime on Billy's face. "Seriously?" Steve said.

Billy's eyes snapped open. "No, of course not." His mouth twisted in disgust, like Steve's question was an apple he'd bitten into and found rotten. "It fucking hurts, dumbass." As Steve watched he gingerly pulled up his tank top and winced when the fabric pulled free from the jagged edges of the wounds. "Get me something to cover this with," Billy said through his teeth.

His blood was lapping at the rubber soles of Steve's shoes. Steve, without much thinking about it, begrudgingly yanked his polyester Scoops Ahoy top over his head with one hand and passed it over. Billy blinked at Steve's yellow sweat-stained undershirt. He started to say something and then balled up the Scoops uniform and pressed it down on his bloody side hard. He hissed and jerked his face away, his free hand clenching on his lap.

Steve was getting dizzy. The sight of blood had never really bothered him, but *something* was happening to his head. He felt like he was seeing everything in high definition detail—the glow of the vending machine down the hall, the blond hairs on his thighs as he knelt over Billy, the wet dark spikes of Billy's eyelashes—all of it so stark and clear the world seemed to take on an edge of unreality.

The last few weeks of Steve's spring semester senior year, when he'd realized his parents weren't going to bankroll a summer of Steve sitting on his ass, he'd driven down to the local pool. It was crowded, choked with kids and parents working on their tans. When Steve asked the guy working the towel stand—a kid he vaguely recognized from class—if they were hiring lifeguards, the guy had laughed in Steve's face.

"We already got one," he'd sneered, "and frankly buddy, you've got nothing on him." Steve had peered around the corner of the towel stand and basically stuck his nose in Billy Hargrove's chest. Steve had reared back. Billy was already tan as a nut and looked, if possible, more muscular than Steve had remembered. Since that night in the

Byers' house, Billy had given Steve a very wide berth. After basketball season ended, Steve wasn't sure if he'd even seen him again in the last few months. Billy had given Steve a cool look as he passed, and drawled "Harrington." Then he'd disappeared into the cool darkness of the locker room. The towel jockey had smiled a very smug smile at Steve. That was the last time Steve had seen him before all...this.

There was nothing left of that calm sun-kissed Billy in the Billy slumped in front of him. This Billy was breathing raggedly, the muscles in his face twitching with pain and nerves. He was chalk white, filthy, his hair tangled and matted to his forehead with sweat.

"Couldn't have jumped in before it took a chunk out of my side?" he snarled.

Steve snarled back, "Yeah, well, you're welcome, *by the way*."

The ground shuddered as the flayer fell dead in the atrium, like a puppet whose strings had been cut in the middle of an act. Billy watched it go down. Without taking his eyes off the flayer, he said, "Took you long enough."

Steve stopped short, his body going rigid. "You remember?" he whispered, half-breathless. A bright almost painful hope ignited in his chest.

Billy avoided his eyes and wriggled upright with a twitch. A weariness settled into his face, smoothing sharp lines around his mouth until he looked somewhat less like a renaissance painting and more like a human. "Yeah," he said. He looked at Steve and his eyes radiated exhaustion. "I fuckin' remember."

Steve sat back on his heels, sagging under the wave of relief that washed over him. Billy remembered. Steve wasn't alone in this—this nightmare—whatever the hell it was. It barely mattered that he was stuck with Billy, who had hated Steve at first sight and who Steve thought of was mildly psychotic.

Steve stared at his hands and forced his voice not to shake. "I thought I was the only one."

Billy's haggard mouth tried to smile. The shadows under his eyes were like black bruises. He kinda looked like a zombie taking a shit. "Right here with ya, Harrington," he said.

From overhead came a sound like a hundred booted feet hitting the roof at the same time and the throbbing *thunkthunkthunk* of helicopter blades. Steve glanced up at the ceiling, distracted, and muttered, "A heads up would've been nice." He was thinking about the time he'd thought *oh god, I'm alone in this, it's just me, no one can help me oh god oh god* and puked in the bathroom sink.

Billy looked affronted. "And let it kill the kid?," he said, his voice ugly-bitter and somehow wounded, as though the idea of El's death hurt him. "Christ, I've done enough, haven't I?"

Steve was saved from having to reply by a camo-clad soldier kicking open the exit door at the end of the hall. Several soldiers filed in with their guns raised and advanced toward Steve and Billy slowly, eyes trained on the dim atrium beyond them. The soldier at the end of the line brought a walkie-talkie up to his mouth and spoke into it. Steve heard the hiss of static and then an unintelligible reply.

Billy had started badly when the door crashed open. He watched the soldiers through narrowed eyes. "What the hell is the army doing here?" he hissed.

"Oh yeah," Steve hummed as a cadet brushed past him and into the food court, "They just show up. I don't actually know why."

Billy squinted at him through his peripheral vision, like Steve's stupidity was too dazzling to look at directly. "*They just show up.* You've done this how many times and you still don't know?"

Steve flushed. He had never thought to ask. "I've had bigger concerns, alright?" he snapped.

Billy opened his mouth to retort and the soldier who had spoken into the walkie stepped out of line with a snap of his heels. His boots were so polished Steve could see his reflection in them. Billy closed his mouth with a click.

“Excuse me sir,” the officer said, addressing Billy in clipped tones, “were you injured by the target?”

Billy leaned away. “I tripped,” he said, and showed his teeth.

The soldier’s face remained stoic, like he didn’t find a wounded teenager to be all that intimidating. “You need medical attention. We will transport you to our temporary base where you’ll receive care.”

Steve *had* noted that none of the other soldiers had ever said a word to him before. The guy who had handed him his keys seemed young and mostly harmless. This soldier, though, was cut from a different kind of cloth. He was doing a decent imitation of Spock and the terminator’s love-child.

Steve considered standing up, but something in the way Spocminator was looking at Billy made him uneasy. He didn’t want to leave Billy alone on the floor.

The door at the end of the hall opened and three officers wearing white badges with a red crosses on their sleeves slipped through with a stretcher. Billy stiffened.

“Like hell,” he growled. ”I’ll stay here.”

“I’m afraid he wasn’t asking,” a voice said smoothly from the food court. A guy about Steve’s dad’s age with snow white hair carefully picked his way around a square of shattered glass and moved into the mouth of the hall, a soldier with an oiled rifle close at his heels. The man briefly flashed a badge at Steve and then tucked it away in the front pocket of his slacks.

“Dr Owens. You need to come with us, young man.”

Steve was momentarily thrown by the description of Billy as a “young man,” when in Steve’s eyes he mostly resembled a rabid ferret.

“Him?” Steve asked, for clarification.

Owens glanced at Steve as if just noticing his presence. “Are... you also injured?”

"Ignore him," Billy snapped. "He's mentally handicapped."

The soldiers inched closer, like sharks following the scent of blood. They stood paces away from Billy now, each of their faces set with identical expressions of grim determination. Like they were expecting a fight, Steve realized.

"Don't fucking touch me," Billy snarled. He dropped the Scoops shirt and stuck out his hand warningly. Steve could see sweat standing out on his forehead.

"Wait," Steve tried again, "let's just talk about this—"

The soldier with the polished boots abruptly turned and shoved Steve by the shoulder. Steve made a noise of surprise and toppled back on his ass, and the guy slid forward, grabbing Billy's outstretched arm and hyperextending it. Steve heard Billy's elbow creak. A medic bent down and snatched at Billy's legs and Billy kicked him in the stomach. The man doubled over briefly and kept coming.

"Don't struggle," Owens soothed.

Billy tried to get his legs under him, his boots slipping in a puddle of his own blood. He had the glassy, caged look of an animal caught in a trap.

"Let go of me," Billy yelled. His eyes went to Steve and he managed "Dont let—" before he bit himself off.

Steve made a move towards him, but the soldier at Owen's side casually lifted the nose of his rifle until it was pointing at Steve's chest. He jerked his chin: *No*. Steve caught a glimpse of Billy's face looking wild, panicked, and then one of the medics stuck a needle in his neck.

"Fuck," Billy gasped. The fight went out of him and he crumpled in their grip. Two of the soldiers manhandled him onto the stretcher, grimacing when he bled on their uniforms. Billy's head lolled. He looked at Steve on the ground and said clearly "Harrington." His eyes shut.

The whole struggle had lasted maybe a minute and a half. It would have been impressive, if they weren't bustling Steve's first chance at answers out the door.

"Get that gun out of my face," Steve spat.

Dr Owens nodded and made a quelling motion with his hand.

"Don't threaten the boy," he said and shook his head, as if the soldier at his side was up to rascally but mostly harmless antics.

The gun swung away and Steve climbed to his feet. He was gratified to find he was taller than Owens. Owens looked at Steve's face and hurriedly stepped out of range.

"Where are you taking him?" Steve asked, voice low.

The doctor began backing down the hall toward the exit. He waved his hands airily. "There's no need for alarm. Due to the...ah, delicate nature of his injuries, it's best to keep him out of a county hospital where he could attract...unwanted attention."

Max and Robin materialized at Steve's side, as though they had been there the whole time. Max looked drawn and pale.

"We saw them take Billy." Robin said under her breath. Max's tiny frame was thrumming with suppressed energy.

"That was my brother," she snarled.

"Ah," Owens said and picked up his pace. He looked like he was speed-walking backwards on a treadmill. Something shifted in his ratty expression, like he knew he was doing something wrong, felt guilty about it, but was doing it anyway.

Steve hurried after him and sprinted to catch up when Owens and his bodyguard pushed through the exit door. Robin and Max were right behind him, breathing down his neck. Outside the back lot was a flurry of activity. There were tanks and helicopters and flashing searchlights beaming white spots on the black top, and everywhere were hundreds of uniformed soldiers. Steve saw the perimeter of the mall had been taped off, officers stationed every few feet.

Billy's limp body had been loaded carefully into the back of a matte black van. Max started forward at the sight of him.

"Billy!" she cried.

Owens edged towards the ambulance, the brake lights outlining him in red light, like he was standing in front of the entrance to hell.

"Now young lady, everything is fine. Your brother will be back home with you in a few hours—"

"You're full of shit," Max screamed, Billy's way of cutting through the BS clearly hereditary, "Let him go! Hasn't he been through enough?"

The doctor smiled in a tight, oily sort of way. "We just need to run a few tests. We need to make sure your brother is okay, you understand that, right sweetie?"

Steve grabbed Max before she could lunge for his throat and Owens used the opportunity to leap into the back of the ambulance. He crowded in behind the stretcher and turned toward the cab.

"Let's go," he said.

Max wailed Billy's name as the ambulance doors swung shut on Owens pinched and faintly apologetic face.

They peeled away, exhaust coughing blue clouds of smoke into the sky. Max struggled in Steve's arms until one of her bony elbows glanced off his ribs. He let her go with a wince.

"We gotta go after them", Max panted, whirling and glaring up Steve with such intensity her eyes seemed to burn. She turned to Robin, voice breaking, and said "Please."

Robin's mouth flattened into a grim line and she nodded. "Of course we're going after them," she said.

Steve scrubbed at his face with one hand. He had the sneaking suspicion he'd already fucked this round up irreparably. Best to cut his losses and slink home, he thought, watch some tv until the ceiling caved in on his head.

“Look,” Steve said reasonably, “Billy was hurt. The guy said he was going to help him. Why don’t we just wait and see—“

“Are you kidding me?” Max spluttered, reddening. “They basically just put a black bag over his head and took off! They’re never going to let him go.”

“Really, dingus?” Robin crossed her arms and raised her brows, rounding on him. She looked like his mom after he’d lipped off. Steve took a hesitant step back.

“We’d never catch up to them,” he tried. “We don’t even have a car.”

Max’s frowned. “Be right back”, she muttered and jogged off into the mall without another word, weaving through soldiers like she was running an obstacle course.

Steve shot an acid glare at Robin. He snapped: “There is no way I’m going—“

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Ten minutes later Steve was behind the steering wheel of Joyce’s sedan, cruising towards the city limit with Robin and Max in the back seat. Max had reappeared with Jonathan’s keys in her hand and grinned crookedly. “He says you owe him one”, she’d reported. Robin had been the one to bully him into the driver’s seat, but Steve knew a losing battle when he saw one.

Steve cranked the window down and yelled over the wind snatching at his hair: “If anybody is home we’re going to have to come in quietly”.

The soldier had said temporary base, but Steve figured the army—or whoever they were—would need somewhere private. Somewhere secure. They wouldn’t want to transport a heavily bleeding Billy far. The only place within fifty miles that fit the criteria was Hawkins lab. Still, they could have a secret hideout he knew nothing about. If Billy wasn’t at Hawkins lab Steve would be shooting in the dark.

“We could scale the fence or something,” Max said. Robin nodded enthusiastically.

Steve scoffed. "Scale the fence? Sure, if you wanna end up as shredded cheese. There's barbed wire at the top." Robin stopped nodding.

They reached the turn-off to the lab, an almost invisible break in the trees. Steve passed it and then had to do a U-turn and go back. He slowly crunched the car up the gravel path towards the lab and killed the headlights. The building was dark.

"Looks like they're not here", he announced cheerfully, "let's go home".

Max silently pointed passed him out the windshield.

At first Steve didn't see anything. The lab and its sloped grounds were pitch black, partially obscured by the towering fence, and Steve's night vision wasn't the best anyway. *Yeah kid, that's a building*, he thought. Then a cigarette flared, illuminating a dark shape loitering by the far east wall. Someone waiting, or watching.

"A sentry?" Robin whispered.

Steve guided the sedan off the road and into the heavy thicket. He killed the motor and they all ducked out, leaving the car doors cracked so they wouldn't slam shut. Steve trooped over and stood next to the fence. It was chain link, maybe fifteen feet tall. Round loops of razor wire encircled the top, glinting wickedly in the moonlight.

"So whose climbing? Steve said, and turned back to the others with his hands on his hips. Robin and Max exchanged a glance and stared at him innocently.

"Why is everyone looking at me?"

"Well..." Robin began and Steve cut her off at the knees.

"No," Steve said. "No way am I gonna climb that thing. This wasn't even my idea."

Max stood up a little straighter and squared her shoulders. "I'll do it," she said.

Steve looked from Max's determined face to Robin, who was casually studying her nails, and stuck his first two knuckles in his mouth. He let out a muffled scream.

Max, in an obsequious bid to be helpful—now that she'd signed Steve's death warrant, thanks—rummaged around in the sedan until she found Jonathan's leather jacket.

"You can drape it across the top of the fence and then climb over," she told him, "the jacket should protect you from the barbed wire." Steve was of the mind that, jacket or not, this wasn't going to end well for him.

He shook the nerves out of his hands and started up the fence, jabbing the toes of his sneakers through the narrow holes.

The metal was cold and difficult to grip, and Steve was already tired. By the time he managed to scale all fifteen feet, he was sweating and gasping for air. Steve clung to the chain link for a moment while he caught his breath. *I could be home right now*, he thought. *M*A*S*H might be on*. He set his jaw and slung the jacket over the barbed wire with a dull *thwap*. The wire reverberated with the force of the blow, trembling and clicking as the barbs glanced off each other.

"Steve!" a voice called from below.

Steve looked down, saw Robin and Max staring off towards the lab, and followed their gaze. The sentry had broken away from the building and was standing alert, pointing a dim flashlight in Steve's direction. Steve froze. A long moment passed in which Steve prayed the guy would come investigate so Steve could climb down and drive away.

The cigarette flared again and the sentry melted back into the shadows.

Steve's muscles were strained and his palms were slick with sweat. He wiped them on his shorts one at a time, and clambered the last few feet to the tail end of Jonathan's jacket. The wind had picked up a little, and there was a bite to it. Steve found himself wishing he hadn't given away his Scoops shirt so easily. He shivered and

gingerly threaded his hands through the tangled wire to grip the top rail of the fence.

The jacket, Steve could now see, was shredded. Wicked barbs had punctured through the soft leather as easily as burrs stuck to cotton. Steve rested his forehead on his forearm for a moment. He would have to get to the top of the fence, balance, and hike his legs over the wire one by one, like he was stepping over a hurdle.

Sure. He could do that.

Steve climbed until the barbed wire was level with his stomach and resolutely did not think about the fact that he hadn't done anything remotely athletic since his last game four months ago. He took a breath, adjusted his hold on the rail, and then lifted one leg up and up like he was mounting a step on a staircase meant for giants. The back of Steve's calf brushed the jacket and one of the barbs slit open his skin so cleanly he didn't feel the cut at all at first. His blood made little muted plops as it dripped onto the leather.

You're okay, Steve told himself in Nancy's voice again.

Steve forced his leg to keep moving until it cleared the wire, and then brought it slowly down until he could wedge his toes in the fence. The fence had been shuddering under his shaky grip throughout the entire ordeal, and Steve had started to think of it as a living being, something wild that resented his touch and wanted to buck him off.

Steve paused, hunched with one leg on either side of the chain link, his arms trembling with the effort of keeping himself upright. The barbed wire was almost brushing his groin. Steve's brain offered up a violent fantasy in which his strength failed and his crotch took a one way trip through a nest of razors.

"Steve!" came another urgent whisper.

Steve tore his mind away from his unmentionables. The sentry had reappeared.

Fuck.

Steve didn't have the energy to freeze. His heartbeat slammed in his ears. He brought his right hand out of the mess of wire and grabbed the fence on the building side, balancing his body weight on the hand still gripping the railing. Then he lifted his leg up straight behind him like a ballerina and swung it over.

Steve had almost cleared the wire when the fabric of his shorts snagged in the barbs. He flinched and a barb sunk into his forearm, blood trickling warm onto the back of his hand and through his fingers.

"Hurry, Steve" Robin hissed.

The flashlight was bobbing down the hill towards him. Sweat stung Steve's eyes and the rail under his hand was slick with his blood. He tore his shorts free from the barbs and had just gotten his leg over the wire when the scream startled him.

The sound came from the bowels of the lab and was inhumanly loud, anguished.

Steve jolted in surprise, his airborne leg swinging towards the ground too fast, and the momentum carried the rest of his body down with it. Steve's hand yanked through the wire as he fell, and when he screamed, Robin and Max joined in.

-

Steve jerked forward, the steering wheel alive under his hands and Robin screaming right in his ear.

Okay, take two, he thought.

Steve made it into the mall in record time. He stopped the kids in the hall and laid out his plan for them, calmly this time, and when Mike looked dubious Steve reassured him until Wheeler broke and snapped, "I *get it!* It'll be fine!"

Steve got them all into position.

Then, the flayer, the fireworks, and El and Billy in their own little world in the middle of it. Billy shutting his eyes, becoming a real boy

again.

Mike and Max moved like a well-oiled machine and grabbed El the moment Billy let go of her, her face white with fear and a wild relief in her eyes.

Steve ran passed, pushing himself to go faster, *faster*—but the flayer shot out a tentacle and sunk its dripping fangs into Billy's side just before Steve reached him.

"Fuck," Steve muttered, and lunged.

He tackled Billy and knocked him to the tile with an ugly smack. The world went fuzzy for a moment, sound warping so Steve's hearing seemed to be filtered through a tin can, and all Steve could focus on was the thunder of Billy's heart in his chest. He blinked, and everything righted again.

Steve rolled them and rose in one movement, and Billy came up fluidly in his hands. His skin was fever hot. Steve grabbed him by the arms and drug him back into the relative shelter of the hallway.

This time Billy didn't sink down to the floor. He seized Steve by the collar and lurched forward with flagging strength until he had Steve pinned to the far wall.

"Don't let them take me," Billy hissed, his nose inches from Steve's.

Steve looked cross-eyed at him. "Wasn't planning on it—"

Billy shook him once, hard enough to rattle Steve's brain in his skull. Steve had a vision of Joyce Byers' kitchen, quick as a camera flash.

"Don't let them take me," Billy said again, his voice rough like he was suppressing a scream. Steve finally saw the terror in his eyes, the hunted look, like Billy was a kid who'd seen something in his closet and was being sent back to bed anyway. Blood had soaked through his jeans and was dripping into his shoes.

"I won't," Steve soothed, and put his hands up in surrender. "I won't."

Billy let go of him, stumbling back, and his knees buckled. Steve caught him around the waist, staggering under his dead weight, and hauled him across the tile until he reached the wall opposite. Billy's feet went out from under him and he sat down heavily. He was white. His breath came in short quick gasps, like it hurt to breathe normally. When Steve looked down at him he shut his eyes.

"Max," Steve hissed, hoping she was near enough to hear him over the din in the atrium. A beat, and Max appeared in the mouth of the hallway, looking frazzled and small.

"Steve?," she said. Billy's bloody handprints were still drying on Steve's shirt.

"Get the keys to Jonathan's car," Steve said. "Don't say anything to anyone, just tell him I need it. Get Robin to bring it out front."

Mercifully Max didn't question him. She darted a look at Billy's face, and when he didn't acknowledge her she nodded to herself and disappeared into the dusty gloom.

Billy's hands were trembling.

Steve knelt down. "Can you walk?"

Billy opened his eyes blearily. He looked exhausted, strung out. "Yes," he snapped, like he was offended to even be asked.

Steve took that as a soft maybe. Steve looked around quickly and stood. "I'll be right back," he said and a flash of alarm flared in Billy's eyes. Overhead the choppers were descending.

"Ten seconds, tops." Steve made himself grin, which seemed to have approximately as comforting an effect as peeling off Billy's fingernails might have.

"Back in a jif!" he added. A more familiar expression of irritation replaced the fearful look lurking in Billy's face. He'd clearly remembered he found Steve's presence equally as bad as whatever he was so afraid of.

Steve slid around the corner with his back to the drywall. The atrium

hung with dust so thick it was like fog. He coughed, his nose streaming, and ducked blindly into the nearest store. Steve could barely see more than a foot in front of him. He squinted through the gloom.

“Fuck,” he hissed and towards the dim shadow of a table near the display window. When he reached it Steve realized it was an actual dinner table complete with table cloth, fancy dishes, and napkins stuffed into ornate holders.

Steve suddenly knew what store he was in—a home goods chain that smelled of popurri and the heavy perfume of the bored housewives who usually perused the stacks. Steve had bought his mom a candle there once, and it was sitting unused on the mantle at home. He snatched the table cloth and ripped it off the table, sending the cookware smashing to the floor.

Steve could hear soldiers boots on the roof. He went blundering backwards, the cloth wadded in his arms, and whirled around the corner. Billy was on his feet waiting for him. He’d braced himself on the wall with one arm and was swaying woozily, his hand clamped over his bloody side.

“Told you I could walk,” he said when he saw Steve. He looked like he was seconds away from collapse.

Steve hoped he wouldn’t give himself a coronary before they could get out of the mall. He shot a nervous glance at the exit door.

“Yeah, you really showed me,” Steve said when he sidled closer, and tossed the tablecloth over Billy’s shoulders before he could open his mouth again. Steve pulled the fabric up over Billy’s head like a hood and tucked it up under his chin. The table cloth hung down Billy’s back to his calves, like a red and white checked cape. He looked, all together, like a very disgruntled grandma in an ugly bonnet and shawl. Billy endured Steve’s efforts in uncharacteristic silence. Steve figured speaking was out of the question when he could barely keep his eyes open.

“C’mon,” Steve said and bundled him into the food court. Steve heard the soldiers burst into the hall a moment later, but by that time he

and Billy had already melted away into the gloom.

The going was slow. Billy's breath came wet and haggard, and he had to lean heavily on Steve for support. From what Steve could see, all the kids seemed too preoccupied with each other to notice their halting progress through the shadows, but every now and then Steve thought he caught a flash of red hair out of the corner of his eye. He just hoped Max had delivered.

The flayer's remains were a hulking mass of dead alien meat in the center of the atrium. Steve gave it a wide berth, and as far as he could tell Billy didn't look in its direction at all. There wasn't much left of it anyway, just a noxious smelling sludge that shadowed figures were hurriedly scraping into little bottles. Steve looked for Dr. Owen's shock of white hair but didn't see him. *Good, stay far the fuck away from us*, he thought.

They had almost made it to the revolving glass doors in the front of the mall when a bored looking soldier stopped them. Steve slung his arm around Billy's shoulders and pulled his head down towards Steve's chest. His nose jabbed into Steve's armpit.

"Where are you two going?" the cadet said, eyeing them dispassionately. He clearly wished he was on clean-up duty—his gaze kept sliding off Steve's face and returning to the flayer.

Steve awkwardly patted at Billy's back. "This is my, uh, girlfriend. She's very upset."

"Your girlfriend," crew-cut repeated.

Steve nodded enthusiastically and prayed the table cloth was big enough to conceal Billy's hairy arms. Billy was so tense he felt like a statue encased in cement. "I wrapped her in this blanket because... her shirt got torn open during the fight. She's embarrassed. Aren't you...Helga?"

Billy nodded stiffly into Steve's chest. The soldier looked them up and down, taking in Billy's substantial frame.

Steve's mind raced. "Helga plays...rugby," he said. He pushed real

pride into his voice, like he was in awe of made-up Helga's performances at her made up rugby games. Steve imagines she would be brutish, yet strangely graceful.

The soldier narrowed his eyes and shifted on his feet, his hand drifting to the butt of his gun. Steve sucked in a breath. His mouth had gone dry. Billy went, if possible, even more tense.

A sharp voice cut through the gloom and crew cut's scrutiny diverted.

"Officer, over here!"

Crew-cut snapped to attention. "Sir," he said and after a pause, nodded at Billy. "Ma'am."

He jogged off. Steve let out the breath he'd been holding in a relieved whoosh, and Billy wrenched himself out from under Steve's arm with a disgusted mumble. His grumbling sounded suspiciously like "*Rugby?*"

Robin was waiting outside Starcourt in the Byers' sedan, the engine idling. She sat up ramrod straight when they burst through the mall's entrance. Her eyes flicked to Billy and widened. Steve ripped open the passenger side door and Billy collapsed into the leather with an audible sigh.

"Get down," Steve said, once he'd banished Robin to the backseat and slid behind the wheel. Billy gave him a baleful look, glanced toward the tank parked haphazardly in the middle of the parking lot, and sunk obediently toward the floor mat.

Steve gunned the motor and peeled out, zipping by a line of heavily armed soldiers, and bouncing out into the empty Hawkins streets.

"What's going on Steve?" Robin whispered. She leaned forward, her arms braced on the driver's seat. Her hair tickled the back of Steve's ear.

Steve glanced over at Billy. His eyes were shut. The streetlights flashed by, painting his face yellow, black, yellow, black.

"I'll let you know when I figure it out," Steve whispered back.

-

Billy didn't stir again until Steve rolled the sedan up his long driveway and put the car in park. He twitched into consciousness all at once and blinked owlishly up at Steve's house.

"Explains the Beamer," Billy drawled slowly. "Mommy and daddy get it for you?"

Steve flushed. The Beamer had, in fact, been a late birthday/apology present, after his parents had bailed on their dinner plans and Steve had spent the evening getting blind drunk alone in the living room. "You forgive us now, don't you?" his mother had said anxiously when she'd lead him outside and passed him the keys.

Steve slammed his car door shut a little harder than was necessary and stood waiting on the pavement with his hands on his hips. Robin got out and joined him. She peered through the windshield at Billy, still sitting motionless.

"Does he...need help?" she asked.

"Probably," Steve said, and crossed his arms.

Billy did look like he needed help. He was shivering, the tablecloth pulled tight around his upper body, a pained grimace plastered across his face.

Steve drummed his fingers on the hood of the sedan and pretended to be very interested in the front lawn.

After a few moments of fruitless struggling, Billy managed to get the passenger side door open with what looked to be a great amount of effort. His booted feet hit the concrete and he paused, panting.

"Need a hand?" Steve called, and Billy reddened.

"I'm fine," he snarled. He used the grab handle to pull himself up onto his feet and stood glaring at them. The table cloth slid off his shoulders and pooled forlornly in his seat.

Robin took pity on him. She walked over and slid an arm around Billy's back. "Let's get you inside," she said and clucked her tongue.

They brushed past Steve without a glance in his direction, Robin helping Billy up the sidewalk, murmuring something in his ear. Billy pulled a face and she laughed. Something softened a little in Billy's profile. Steve hurriedly caught up to them and unlocked the front door.

He snapped on the light in the foyer, temporarily blinding them all. Billy gently extricated himself from Robin's grip and leaned heavily against the wall. He rubbed at his eyes.

Steve hadn't liked seeing them talking to each other, touching each other. It reminded him of how he used to feel when he saw Nancy and Jonathan together—a feeling like annoyance, only sharper, more bitter.

Now that Steve could see her properly, Robin looked like the final girl in a horror movie. There was blood on her hands and dirt on her clothes and her hair was tangled and wild.

Steve sighed and sent her upstairs. "Go," Steve told her, "I've got him."

Robin shook her head. "It's okay, I can help." The shadows under her eyes and the fine tremble in her fingers said otherwise.

Steve shooed her away with a dismissive flap of his hand. "You can sleep in my bed. It's the last door to the right. This is my thing, I've got it."

Robin looked at Billy. Whatever she saw in his face must have been permission enough to leave him, because she shook her head helplessly and mounted the stairs. She did spare Steve one last dubious glance before she disappeared into his room, her eyes in suspicious little slits. She didn't look like she had much faith in Steve's nursemaid abilities. Steve tried not to take it personally.

"No wonder you didn't seem too cut up about the Wheeler priss," Billy said, and stared up at the landing. "I'd call this one an upgrade."

Be cool, Steve told himself.

“You’re dripping on my floor,” he snapped.

-

Steve was sweating profusely when he finally lugged Billy into his parent’s bathroom. Billy’s strength had started to fail in earnest a few steps into the hall and by the time they made it to the master bedroom Steve had been supporting almost all his weight. Steve caught a glimpse of his brick red face in the bathroom mirror before he unceremoniously dumped Billy into the empty tub.

The master bathroom was surprisingly small and cramped. There was the narrow tub, the toilet next to it, and the double sink next to that. To compensate for its size, Steve’s mother had painted the walls a bright lemon yellow, and had the tile redone to match the walls. His father said he had to wear sunglasses to take a piss.

Steve slumped over, his hands on his knees, and gasped for air.

Billy, who was laying with his eyes shut again, had grunted in pain when Steve dropped him but said nothing. His head was tipped back against the tile, his long legs sticking out of the bath.

When Steve caught his breath, he padded out of the bedroom and hooked a right into his dad’s office. Over the years Steve had gotten good at breaking into his dad’s liquor cabinet. He could pick the lock with a ballpoint pen in about twenty seconds flat. Steve knelt, fiddled around for a moment, and cracked the polished wood cabinet open. It was well-stocked, as always. Half empty decanters of brandy and rum winked at him in the lamplight. Steve eyed the collection and settled on a full bottle of whiskey. Good shit, he was fairly sure.

He doubled back and snagged a pair of nail scissors from his mom’s vanity on the way back in.

Billy still hadn’t moved. Steve kicked his foot.

“Hey, you still alive?”

Billy opened his eyes blearily, like Steve had woken him from a deep

sleep. “So far,” he said, a little muddled, and then his gaze fixed on the bottle in Steve’s hand. “Thank Christ,” he groaned, “give it.”

Billy reached for the whiskey and Steve dutifully passed it over. After a few slugs Billy’s color looked a little more lively. “Not a complete asshole after all, are you Harrington?” Billy held the bottle up and waggled it in a proprietary sort of way. He wasn’t smiling but he looked almost smug, like *he* had been the one to practice picking the liquor cabinet lock every day the summer he turned 16.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Steve said and knelt at the side of the tub. He showed Billy the scissors. “You wanna cut your shirt off or should I?”

Billy gave him a long, considering once-over and Steve felt himself flush. There was something disconcerting about Billy’s blue eyes, how they were the color of shallow-looking lagoons with hidden depths. *Look away*, Steve thought.

Billy tapped his finger once on the neck of the bottle. “I’ll do it,” he said finally.

“Trade me.”

Steve got the whiskey back and shakily swallowed a burning mouthful while Billy cut up the center of his tank top until it split open like a vest. The puncture wounds from the tentacles were bleeding sluggishly, the skin around them bleach white. They looked deep.

Billy raised his eyebrows at Steve. “Happy now?”

“Yeah,” Steve said and rose up on his knees. “Sorry.”

“What—“

Steve upended the bottle of whiskey on Billy’s abdomen and Billy gasped like he’d been doused with ice water. His legs spasmed. He braced his hands on the tub, knuckles white, and wrenched his face away from Steve.

Steve crawled over to the sink and rummaged around in the cabinet

underneath. He couldn't bring himself to feel too repentant. There was an aggravating, buzzing sensation under his skin, like an itch that got worse the more he didn't scratch it. The feeling had started when Billy slammed him into the wall back at Starcourt, and it hadn't really gone away since. It made Steve want to smash up Billy's nicely constructed face.

Billy was still making gasping noises in the tub like a fish out of water, cords standing out in his neck, when Steve's fingers closed over the smooth plastic of a first aid kit.

"Fuck you Harrington—goddamn no warning—"

Steve knocked the dust from the cover and crawled back over to the tub. One of Billy's hands hovering helplessly over his wounds.

"Sorry," Steve repeated, not meaning it at all, and brandished the whiskey at him. Billy took it with an expression of pure hatred. He looked briefly like he was considering hitting Steve over the head with it, but tipped the bottle up to his mouth and drained the last dregs instead.

Steve leaned over the side of the bath and studied the punctures.

"Can you...feel anything in there?" Steve asked, thinking of the black goo exploding out of El's leg.

A muscle jumped in Billy's jaw. "No," he said.

Steve shrugged. "I have to clean and bandage this up or you'll get an infection," he said.

Billy rolled his eyes. "Oh, wow Doctor Harrington, did you worry about *in-fec-shun* in medical school? Oh wait—you didn't go to college, did you?"

Steve took a cleansing breath and tried to keep himself from imagining smashing Billy's head into the sharp edge of the faucet. He cracked open the first aid kit to keep his hands occupied. Inside were various cotton swabs, gauze pads, medical tape, and a small bottle of iodine. Steve unscrewed the bottle and dribbled some of the orange iodine out onto a cotton swab.

“So,” he said, after a few beats of silence, “do you think it’s over?”

Billy still looked deeply aggrieved. “Do I think *what’s* over?”

Steve leaned over the tub and pushed the swab into one of Billy’s wounds. “It—this. The repeating. Whatever is happening to us. Do you think it’s over?”

Billy winced and batted at his arm. “*Ahh—fuck*, Harrington, how the hell should I know?”

Steve tossed the bloody swab at the drain and wet another.

“Take it easy with that,” Billy snapped. He flinched away from Steve like a kicked dog.

Steve continued without acknowledging him. “The kids—I mean, one time I repeated—and I told them about...everything. They thought the whole...thing sounded like a-a video game.” Steve made himself say it. Normally he’d be loathe to say *anything* to Billy that wasn’t an insult, but he needed backup, an alternate theory, *something*. Steve was all out of ideas.

When Billy didn’t say anything, Steve avoided his eyes and heavy-handedly daubed the cotton swab on the next wound.

Billy seized his wrist with a hiss. “I told you to watch it,” he spat. His fingers flexed hard, biting into Steve’s skin.

Steve pulled his hand back hastily and Billy leveled him with a flat stare.

“A video game.”

Steve squirmed. “Yeah, you know. You have to keep playing it until you...win.” The last word sounded small and unsure, like the runt of an already bad litter.

Billy looked deeply unimpressed, and a little pitying.

Steve ducked his gaze, ears hot like he’d given the wrong answer when called on in class, and grabbed for another cotton pad.

Billy reached out lightning quick and snatched the bottle of iodine from his grip. "Give me that," he growled. "Christ, no wonder you can't keep a girl. A light touch is a foreign concept to you, huh?"

He very gently poured the iodine over his wounds, like he was performing a delicate and precise bit of artistry. His fingers were trembling.

"Sorry," Steve managed, feeling clumsy and suddenly miserable.

Billy stuck his hand out, palm open. "I can patch myself up," he sniffed

Steve gave him the kit and sat back on his heels. "So your big theory," Billy said, roughly ripping open several gauze pads, "was posited by a bunch of sixth graders—and it's that we're stuck in a video game."

Steve colored. "Not literally—"

Billy laid the gauze over his wounds with a tight set to his jaw and interrupted, "Figuratively, whatever. And if we just come up with the right moves, we can get out of this and live happily ever after."

Steve shrugged his hands helplessly. "Something like that, sure."

Billy snorted. "Yeah, sounds like something a kid would come up with."

Steve felt himself stiffen. "Do you have a better theory?" he snapped.

Billy tore off a few ribbons of tape from the roll with his teeth. "I just figured I was in hell," he said. His tone was final. He taped the gauze to his abdomen with his tongue sticking between his teeth and didn't say anything else.

Steve felt like he'd been slapped down. He dug his palms into his eyes and felt his last bit of self control fray and snap. "Aren't you tired of dying?" Steve wailed. "I can't do it anymore. I'm losing my mind. If you would just listen to me, maybe we could—"

Billy looked up. "You're dying?" he asked.

Steve felt a glimmer of hope. He swiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "Yeah, every time. Then I reset in front of the mall, same as you."

Billy cocked his head, like a bird dog hearing a far away sound. "How are you dying?"

"The first time I—" Steve stopped.

Billy widened his eyes. "Share with the class, Harrington," he coaxed, and Steve knew he'd stepped right into a trap.

"I fell in the shower," he muttered.

The corner of Billy's lips twitched. "And what happened the other times?"

"I was," Steve carried on miserably, "electrocuted by the coffee machine."

A grin spread across Billy's mouth. "Oh no," he said, completely delighted, "that must have been awful."

"Forget it," Steve snapped and climbed to his feet.

"No, no, I'm *interested* Harrington. I'm listening."

Billy looked up at him, his eyes preternaturally bright. *He's handsome*, Steve thought suddenly, as if he'd never seen him before.

Billy was half dead and he was still handsome, and worst of all he didn't seem to care that they were both trapped in a night terror worse than anything Steve's brain had ever dreamed up. Steve's head hurt and his shoulder ached from knocking into the wall while he helped Billy into the bathroom, and he was all at once completely, coldly furious.

"Fine, okay, then I was hit by a car and then I choked to death on some chicken."

Billy's smirk bloomed into a laugh, a bright easy sound that bounced off the bloody yellow tile. Steve felt it like an arrow to his chest.

“Laugh it up,” Steve exploded, “at least I get some variety!”

The smile fell off Billy’s face, quick as snuffing out a candle. He tossed the kit off to his side and maneuvered himself up until he could sit on the rim of the tub.

“And I just get what I deserve, right?” Billy said.

Steve blinked, his mind a howling blank, and Billy’s mouth twisted into an ugly facsimile of the grin he’d just worn. “Or maybe,” he said, “I get the worst way to die because *you* couldn’t handle it.”

Before Steve could think of a reply, Billy grabbed the edge of the bathroom counter and pulled himself to his feet. “I’m tired,” he said, and brushed past Steve on his way out the door.

Steve hesitantly followed. “The guest bedroom is upstairs,” he said, wringing his hands.

“Couch is fine.”

Steve caught up to him when Billy paused to catch his breath. His back was facing Steve, one hand clutching the side of the Harrington’s wardrobe for support.

Steve stared at his shoulder blades and forced out: “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.” He didn’t know what he was apologizing for. Only—*Don’t leave*, Steve thought, and he remembered the thousands of times he’d thought the same thing, at Nancy, at his parents.

Billy turned around, the light from the bathroom spilling over him like a spotlight.

He should have looked stupid, with his shirt in tatters and the giant bandage plastered across his ribs, but he didn’t. He was built, the hard lines of his muscles standing out in sharp relief, his jeans slung low on his hips. His mouth was red and his eyes were very dark.

He looked like a fucking movie star.

“Harrington,” Billy said, in the voice of someone long suffering,

“you’re fucking clueless.”

And Steve had nothing to say to that.

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4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

Back from hiatus! I hope everyone is staying healthy and safe.

Thanks to everyone who commented on my last chapter. Your words mean the world to me!

This is a shorter chapter, but I'll have the next one up in the next few weeks!

The next morning Steve woke to the low murmur of voices drifting up from downstairs. His tongue felt like sandpaper and he had the kind of headache he got after a game when he hadn't drunk enough water. His whole right side was aching, too. He'd ended up crashing in the guest room upstairs, since he'd made Robin take his bed. The guest room was empty except for a low oak wardrobe crouched against one wall and the full-sized bed Steve currently occupied shoved into the corner opposite. Steve's mom had gotten the mattress secondhand from their elderly neighbor, and it was lumpy and sagging in the middle. Steve had slept like the dead anyway.

After their conversation in the master bedroom, Steve had followed a coldly silent Billy into the living room. Billy had a way of radiating an almost palpable displeasure when he was pissed—like a human space heater, except instead of emitting warmth he just made anyone in his immediate vicinity feel like shit—only then Steve hadn't gotten anything from him. It had been like Steve had winked out of existence the second Billy turned his back on him. Steve would have almost preferred a fist fight.

Billy had shuffled his way over to the loveseat without deigning to look in Steve's direction, collapsed onto his back and immediately started snoring. Steve stood over the couch for a full minute, squinting at Billy's face in the dark, sure he was faking, until Billy's mouth slackened and his legs twitched like a current of electricity had run through them.

Then Steve had sighed, tossed a blanket over him, and crawled

upstairs.

He'd sat in the shower for a long time afterwards, scrubbing the grime off his body and silently fuming under the hot spray. It was just like Billy, Steve had thought, scraping blood off his neck, to give up when the odds were stacked against them. He'd lost track of how many times Billy had ripped off his jersey and walked out in the middle of a game Hawkins was unsalvageably behind in, leaving Steve and the rest of the team to suffer through the actual defeat. "Why should I stick around just to watch us lose?" he'd panted at the coach once, midway through running the bleachers as punishment the next day.

Steve had been so blinded by relief when he'd realized he wasn't alone in the loop that he hadn't given a thought to who he was stuck with. He'd climbed out of the shower and gone to sleep feeling more lonely than he had since the whole nightmare started.

In the watery light of the morning, Steve was empty in that hollowed out, day-after-a-long-cry kind of way, like all his feelings had drained out of him in the night. Now he was left with an exhaustion so deep his limbs felt like they weighed an extra fifty pounds each. The saggy mattress whispered to him in a voice like the snake in the garden of Eden: *ssstay in my arms Steve, ressst. You dessserve it.*

"Hey Steve!" Robin called, smashing through the snake's pillow talk. Her voice was muffled but still clear enough, and she sounded bright and bushy tailed. "Wakey-wakey!"

Steve grumbled and pulled the comforter over his head. Robin was always at her most chipper when they opened together, claiming she felt "energized" by the early hour. Steve's inability to be fully verbal before his first cup of coffee was the butt of many jokes. Steve usually just flipped her the bird. He'd long regarded morning people with the kind of suspicion most reserved for former felons.

Maybe if he kept quiet, he thought, she'd forget about him and he could fit another hour or two of sleep in. He stretched under the cool sheets.

"Stevie," Robin continued sweetly, "we're about to plug the coffee

pot in, do you want us to make you a cup?"

Coffee good, Steve's caffeine addicted brain supplied. Then his eyelids flew open like someone had yanked the pull cord on a pair of blinds.

The coffee machine.

A phantom ache lit up the nerves in his arm like lightning.

"No," Steve breathed and strangled out a yell. "Don't—!"

He broke into a run before he could even thrash his way out from under the covers, the comforter tangling around his waist and jerking off the mattress. Steve stumbled out onto the carpeted hall and took the stairs two at a time, his heart in his throat. Not again. He couldn't lose her again.

"Don't!" Steve choked out, holding back a scream.

He tripped through the foyer and came barreling into the living room. Visions of Robin turning as black as a rotten log while her hand sizzled on the electrical cord and her skull chattered in her head floated in front of his eyes. The couch was empty but Steve barely noticed. He vaulted over the automan and leapt barefoot through the kitchen doorway, already braced against the horror of what he'd find, one hand out and ready to rip the coffee machine from Robin's dying grip—

The coffee machine glinted innocently at Steve from where it was perched on the counter, a half empty carafe of coffee still cradled in its warming tray.

"What," Steve said, skidding to a stop.

Billy and a very much alive Robin were seated next to each other at the kitchen table, staring at him with their eyes wide. They looked like they'd been up for a while, but Billy at least still carried traces of the night before. His hair was sleep-mussed and there was a fading crease on his cheek from one of the couch cushions. He had broken off mid-sentence, his long fingers paused inches from the handle of a steaming mug.

Robin, who had jolted in surprise when Steve flung himself into the room, was frozen in place with an open carton of half & half held aloft and ready to pour.

Steve blinked at them uncomprehendingly. "But...the coffee...?" he said.

Billy was the first to react. He tapped his mug with a fingernail and hummed in a self-satisfied sort of way, as if he'd just proved a point. Robin glanced sidelong at him and dissolved into a helpless, disbelieving giggle. "Hol-ee shiiiit," she whistled, tipped a dollop of cream into her coffee. "How'd you know he was gonna do that?"

Billy cracked his neck and graced her with an indulgent grin, like a prince bestowing a lavish gift on an undeserving peasant. "I know things," he said loftily, and Robin jostled him with her shoulder. Steve caught Billy slide a wince into a delicate sounding cough.

"Whatever." Robin rolled her eyes. "Do you want me to pay up now, or can I just use the money to buy my own drink when we go out?"

Billy sat back in his chair and spread his hands indulgently. "Buy my drink too and I'll call us even," he drawled.

"I'm sorry," Steve said, gawking. "What's going on?"

Robin finally looked away from Billy long enough to smirk at Steve over the top of her mug. "Billy said that if I told you I was about to use the coffee machine you'd come running down. I didn't believe him, so we bet on it." She shrugged. "I lost, clearly. Now I have to buy both our drinks."

Steve looked between them. "Your drinks?" he repeated.

"I asked her out, Harrington." Billy said. "You know, to a bar?"

He looked Steve up and down dismissively, his tongue between his teeth, and Steve realized he'd gone to bed wearing a ratty pair of Looney Tunes boxers and nothing else. He considered grabbing a tea towel and holding it up in front of his torso.

"Some of us have fake I.D.s," Billy continued in a low purr. At Steve's

scandalized expression his smirk deepened. “Jealous, Harrington?”

“As friends,” Robin clarified hastily, “We’re going out as friends.”

“That happened fast,” Steve said.

Billy conceded the point with a quirk of his eyebrow. “Well, you were sleeping, so someone had to keep Buckley entertained.”

He stretched an arm languidly around the back of Robin’s shoulders and Steve stiffened. “Oh, by scaring the shit out of me?” he snapped.

Billy made a noncommittal gesture with his hand. “Among other things,” he said.

Robin jumped in to defuse the tension. “There’s breakfast for you,” she said and shrugged out from under Billy’s arm. Billy didn’t seem to notice; his eyes were on Steve. “It’s in the oven keeping warm.”

“Great,” Steve growled and tore his gaze away from Billy. He looked down at his bare feet, brown and naked on the white tile.

“I’ll be right back,” he announced with dignity and flounced out, his skin crawling with the feeling of eyes on his back long after he’d turned the corner.

Steve returned a few minutes later in a pair of jeans and a mostly clean t-shirt. Compared to the underwear it felt like armor.

In his absence, Billy had gotten up to lounge bonelessly against the counter near the coffee machine, the normally lean line of his legs slightly marred by the baggy pair of Mr. Harrington’s rumpled sweats he’d pilfered. He was shirtless, and the bandage over his side was tinged pink and wet looking. When Steve walked in, he was in middle of regaling Robin with some stupid story about basketball while she fiddled with the stove and didn’t look up. Steve crossed over to the coffee machine.

“You’re oozing,” he muttered and reached for the coffee carafe.

Billy clamped a hand over Steve's wrist before he could make it. "Be careful," he told Steve sweetly, voice pitched low. "You don't wanna have another accident again, do you Harrington?" Billy's palm was hot and clammy, like he'd been outside in the heat for hours.

Steve shot a glance at Robin, but her back was still turned. "I touched the electrical cord, you asshole," he hissed and jerked his wrist out of Billy's grip with a twist of his forearm.

Billy leaned away. He smelled like Mrs. Harrington's shampoo and deodorant. This close Steve could see his chest was covered in a light blonde peach fuzz. When Billy spoke again it was at a regular volume, clearly for Robin's benefit: "Let me help you with that."

He snatched an empty mug from the cabinet behind him and carefully filled it to the brim while Steve stood with his fists clenched at his sides. Then he passed it over without comment.

Steve took the mug gingerly without looking at him, keeping it as level as possible to avoid a spill, and slid into a chair. Robin kicked him under the table. "Thanks," Steve gritted out, and grimaced in Billy's direction.

Billy gave him a mocking half-bow and jerked a thumb in the direction of the foyer. "I'll be back," he said to Robin, and slipped out of the kitchen.

Once he was out of sight, Steve widened his eyes at the tabletop and blew on his scalding hot coffee. "What the hell was that?" he asked, jerking his chin towards the coffee maker.

Robin shrugged and reached behind them to pry open the oven door. She grabbed a chipped plate from the rack with her fingertips and plonked it in front of Steve with a flourish.

The majority of the plate's surface area was taken up by a truly prodigious pile of dehydrated looking scrambled eggs, flanked by a soggy piece of toast and two strips of wilted bacon. Steve had probably seen more appetizing food at free hotel breakfasts.

"What the hell was what—the whispered exchange you guys had

behind my back, or the fact that you seemed to think plugging in the coffee machine would kill me? Or was there something else I missed?"

Steve wheezed and stuffed a strip of bacon into his mouth to buy himself some time. "I meant," he managed when he'd finished chewing, "his whole 'let me help you' thing."

"Oh," Robin said mildly, and stole some crust from Steve's toast with her fingertips, "I think he was trying to be nice."

"Nice? Him?"

Robin rolled her eyes and motioned to his plate. "Eat," she said, "I slaved over those eggs."

Steve dutifully shoveled his mouth full and moaned around the fork. The last food he'd eaten that wasn't cereal was the chicken he'd choked to death on. Someone was bound to know the heimlich this time if Steve inhaled some yolk into his windpipe. Then again, Billy seemed like he might relish life without Steve. He'd certainly done okay for himself with Robin.

A fresh wave of irritation rolled over Steve's head. *Don't say it*, he told himself as the dry eggs stuck to the roof of his mouth, *let it go for once, Harrington*.

Steve swallowed thickly and blurted out: "Why were you even talking to him anyway?" A fleck of egg white launched across the table top. "He's a total asshole."

Robin leaned back in her chair coolly, as if she'd expected this reaction. She raised her eyebrows. "So were you, up until about 24 hours ago."

Steve glared at her and reproachfully crammed toast into his mouth. "That's different," he mumbled.

Robin laughed and patted his back consolingly. "People change, you know? Maybe he wants to turn over a new leaf, after what he's been through."

Steve gave an inelegant snort. "You're just willing to forgive him because he never went out with any girl you had a crush on."

Robin slugged him in the arm so hard his hand went numb.

Billy didn't return until Steve had licked the last remnants of his breakfast off the plate. He came in whistling, hands stuffed in the front pockets of a pair of golf shorts, feet still bare. He'd put on a shirt at least, one of Mr. Harrington's pale blue button-ups, and the sleeves were rolled up to his elbows.

Steve pretended not to notice his presence and scrapped his chair back to dump his plate in the sink. "Where did you get the food anyway?" Steve asked, raising his voice over the rush of water from the tap.

Robin craned her neck around and gestured towards the front of the house. "I walked to Ned's while you two lazybones were still sleeping. It's probably the only place in town still open."

Ned's was a local supermarket a few blocks away from Steve's house. It was a nice place, a little small, but usually clean and well stocked. Ned himself was still alive, barely. Sometimes his private nurse wheeled him and his oxygen tank through the store, and all the kids from Hawkins high who worked the cash registers stood at attention when he rolled past.

There was a low rumble of thunder overhead. Robin slipped out of her chair and stretched. "I better go check on my apartment," she said. She narrowed her eyes at Steve. "Will you two be okay?"

Steve darted a glance at Billy. Billy had leaned against the kitchen counter again, one broad hand wrapped around a mug of Mrs. Harrington's that said *A Mom is a Boy's Best Friend*. His hair looked a little frizzy, like dandelion fluff, but otherwise he looked unruffled, unfazed by the question and Robin's tone.

"I don't know," he said, and raised an eyebrow at Steve. "Will we be okay without Buckley here to hold our hands?" His eyes were so blue

they looked almost unreal. Steve's fingers twitched. He frowned down at the sink.

"I think we can manage," he muttered.

Robin shrugged her shoulders. "Suit yourselves," she said as Steve dropped his plate into the dishwasher with a clatter. "Try playing nice today, huh guys?"

Billy winked. "No promises."

Robin flipped him the bird and paused on her way through the kitchen doorway. "Don't forget about that drink, okay? I'm holding you to it." She was clearly chiding him, but her voice sounded gentle, like she was speaking to a wounded animal at the side of the road, and not an evil teenager with an attitude problem and severe anger issues. The back of Steve's neck itched.

Billy, seemingly unaware of her tone, raised his mug in a mock salute.

Robin looked at Steve. "Walk me out?" she asked. Steve got up and followed her without a backward glance.

Steve crowded on to the front stoop next to Robin and she quietly closed the front door.

The wind had picked up, dropping the temperature and making the air cool and sweet. Dark storm clouds hung in the sky and everywhere was the smell of summer rain. The breeze ruffled Steve's hair. Robin leaned off the stoop to squint up at the heavens and tucked the fluttering bag that contained her filthy Scoops uniform closer to her side.

"Think you can beat the storm?" Steve asked.

Robin grinned. "If I run fast."

She lived a few streets north of Ned's, in a block of old apartments called The Pines. Steve had never seen them. His parents considered

the area to be “low rent.” He couldn’t imagine what they’d think if they knew he’d let a Pines resident stay the night in their house. Probably nothing good.

When Steve clued back in Robin was looking at him patiently, her gaze direct and scrutinizing. She had to be used to Steve’s habit of spacing out by now, and she’d clearly decided waiting him out was her best course of action. “Steve,” she said, “He wouldn’t tell me what’s going on.” She didn’t need to clarify.

Steve shifted uncomfortably on his feet, crossing his arms over his chest, and Robin shot an anxious glance at the door, like she was afraid Billy was standing on the other side with his ear pressed against the wood. “He said you wouldn’t tell me either.”

Steve rubbed a hand over his face. Of course she’d asked Billy. They’d been talking all morning, and Robin was nothing if not direct.

Steve nodded reluctantly. “I can’t get into it,” he said and wrung his tone into something apologetic. If he thought bringing her into their mess would do anything other than get her hurt again, Steve would spill his guts right now—but the vision of Robin’s body lying prone on the tile was too fresh behind his eyelids, the horror of her death too close to the surface.

Robin sighed and looked up into the eaves of the portico, as if searching for inspiration. Steve followed her gaze. The beams over the porch were hung with cobwebs shuddering in the wind, and wedged into the space where two wooden slats crossed was a squishy ball Steve had lost when he was a kid.

“I could help you,” Robin said finally. “If you’d let me.” She met his eyes solemnly. “You can trust me,” she said, and there was a weight to her words.

Steve knew she was thinking of her confession in the Starcourt bathroom. He could imagine how he’d feel if he’d shared a secret that big. He’d want a secret in return probably, some kind of collateral, to make them equal. But Steve remembered the look on her face the last time he’d told her about the loop. Who knew what she’d do if she thought Billy shared his...delusion.

"It's not personal," he said instead, hating himself for doing this to her a little more with every word. "There's a lot going on, and I don't wanna drag you into it." It sounded paltry even to his ears, but Robin just smiled ruefully and shook her head.

"Well, I tried," she said. Steve would have to be blind to miss the disappointment in her eyes. Thunder rumbled again, closer this time, loud enough that the glass panes in the living room window trembled in the frame.

Robin looked back at the sky. "That's my cue. Look, you'll still call if you need me though, right?"

Steve nodded and promised with a hand placed solemnly over his heart. Laughing, Robin hopped off onto the sidewalk and shouldered her bag. She took a couple steps and then turned. "He's not bad, you know," she said offhandedly, like she felt duty-bound to defend Billy's honor.

Steve grimaced. "Right, he's awful," he said.

Robin just smirked at him. "Well, maybe I'm a better judge of character than you are. Go easy on him, Harrington."

The sky opened up at last and drizzled a light rain on her curly head. Robin gave him a thumbs-up and took off running, lifting a hand over her head in a wave as she tore down the street. She didn't look back.

When Steve ducked back inside, Billy was standing in the middle of the living room, watching Robin's receding form blur through the rain tapping on the big picture window.

"She won't remember any of this if we die again?" he asked, as Steve closed the door with a snap. His voice was dreamy and remote, like he was thinking of something else, but Steve felt his temper spark into life anyway.

He took a steadying breath and said: "No," not trusting himself to elaborate any further.

Billy kept looking out the window. “Good,” he said.

Steve froze with his toes still on the tile floor of the foyer.

Good?

Robin was clearly in denial about Billy’s true motivations, but Steve had heard enough of his locker room talk to know what he was really after.

What if they died again and Billy used something Robin had told him to manipulate her, or make her trust him or—or Steve could only guess what.

“She’s not interested in you,” Steve snapped. “Back the fuck off.”

Billy made an incredulous noise, somewhere between a laugh and a snort. “You *are* jealous!” he said, turning to look at Steve with his eyes lighting up in slowly dawning comprehension.

Steve went rigid and Billy went on, laughing: “Boy, have I got some bad news for you.” There was a mean edge to his voice, like he’d found a weak spot he meant to exploit.

“I don’t have to listen to this,” Steve muttered.

He started across the living room and Billy was still talking, vicious amusement in his voice. “Anyone who talks to her for more than five seconds can tell she’s a raging—“

“Shut up,” Steve snarled.

They were a few feet apart now, and Steve was breathing heavily. His hands flexed at his sides.

Billy gave him a long slow blink, like he was a lizard Steve had disturbed while it sunned itself on a rock. In Billy’s eyes was the same cold, reptilian intelligence. He wasn’t laughing anymore. “You gonna make me?” Billy said finally, his voice carefully bleached of emotion.

Outside the storm picked up, wind whipping the rain into the side of the house in slapping sheets.

Steve hesitated. Billy didn't look anything at all like the weak, nearly dead version of himself he'd been last night. In the daylight he radiated strength and vitality—his skin tan and teeth white. His side didn't seem to be bothering him very much. If they came to blows, Steve couldn't say for certain who would win. And there was something else, too. Steve could feel an energy sparking between them like a live wire, a kind of simmering possibility that made Steve think at any moment Billy could grab him or hit him or even just step forward and touch him, just touch his shoulder, which somehow seemed worse than all the other things put together. Billy was too unpredictable, too wild.

Steve's mother had always told him if he stirred the pot too much, eventually he'd get burned.

He blew a breath out between his teeth and leaned away. "You really are something," Steve said. He could brush it off, let it go. Just walk right out of the living room and avoid another beat down—

Billy snagged Steve's arm and *tsked* at him like a disappointed school teacher. "No, *no*, where are you going, Harrington? We were talking. I'm something, right?" He sounded like he thought the whole thing was one big joke, but expression was too avid, his grip on Steve's elbow too tight. "Go ahead and finish your thought," he urged. "What am I?"

It occurred to Steve that Billy had touched him more in the last twenty-four hours than he had in the entire time they'd known each other. He had a sudden flash of certainty that this was only the first in a long series of ways Billy was going to force himself into Steve's life—Steve's house, Steve's personal *space*—like a creeping fungus. Billy didn't do boundaries. Even in basketball Billy just pushed and pushed until he went right through his opposition.

The walls of the living room drew closer around them, like eager spectators and Steve barked out a laugh. "Christ, can you cool it on the macho routine for five seconds?"

Billy didn't say anything, just kept boring a hole into Steve's face with his creepy unblinking eyes.

Steve's elbow was beginning to hurt. He looked around the room for some sort of lifeline. The normally benign loveseat seemed to have developed a sinister look, the fabric on its cushions ripening from a sunflower yellow to a jaundiced shade of rancid butter. Faces were forming in the floral wallpaper, sunflowers peering out at him with hateful delight.

Am I still tripping? Steve thought, through a wave of dizziness. *If you are*, said a treacherous voice in the back of his head, *then it's about to be a very bad trip.*

Steve attempted to free his arm with a renewed burst of energy, but Billy held on fast. His grip tightened, almost in warning.

"You're an asshole, okay?" Steve snapped. He was feeling lightheaded. "Is that what you want to hear? You are an asshole. Now will you let go of me?"

Capillaries burst in Steve's skin under Billy's fingers. His bone creaked ominously. Maybe Steve had finally died for good and this was his divine punishment for breaking Jonathan's camera. Billy licked his lips and yanked Steve closer. A bead of sweat slipped down the small of Steve's back.

"Is that all you got?" Billy hissed. His eyes unfocused for a moment, as if listening to some internal sound only he could hear, and then they were back, probing Steve's face with an almost palpable weight, like sick little caresses.

Steve's mind went blank. His hand was going numb, Billy wouldn't let go and Steve was boxed in, trapped. Trapped like he'd been in the Russians' cell. Or the Byers' house, the very first time he'd ever seen the monster. His head pounded.

Billy looked down at Steve's mouth. "Guess I shouldn't expect any cutting remarks from the guy whose only friends are middle schoolers," he said softly. He smiled and leaned in conspiratorially. "Cmon, Steve you can tell me, are you waiting for one of the kids to turn 18? My sister's a big fan of yours—"

Steve shoved him back with all the force he had. Billy dropped his

arm with surprisingly little resistance and went stumbling backwards into the couch, the cushions knocking his knees out from under him. He landed on his ass with a low grunt.

“It’s not like that,” Steve spat, nearly trembling. “I would never—“

And Billy laughed, a strained breathless sort of sound. It showed too many of his perfectly straight white teeth. Steve wanted to knock him through the window.

“Don’t be so touchy, Stevie,” Billy said, crooning Steve’s name in a low sing-song. ”I’m only kidding around.”

He got up slowly, his hands out in front of him, placating. Steve stepped back. The grandfather clock behind him ticked off the seconds, and Steve’s heartbeat throbbed in his ears.

“Don’t,” he said.

Billy still had that fake grin plastered across his mouth, like it’d been taped on. “Don’t what?”

“I’m warning you man, don’t.”

Every muscle in Billy’s shoulders was tense. Steve knew he was going to lunge. He looked the exact same when he was waiting for tip-off at a game, like a coiled spring begging for release.

Steve planted his feet and something burned in Billy’s eyes. *Hit me*, his face said. And Steve, miserable and scared shitless and alone, thought: *Yes*.

A car door slammed in front of the house and Steve snapped out of it as quickly as if he’d been doused with ice water. He couldn’t see the street through the driving rain, but the curtains of the bay window were wide open, perfectly framing Billy between them like the subject in a portrait.

“Shit,” Steve hissed and brainlessly dropped into a crouch. He motioned frantically to Billy, who had straightened up awkwardly when Steve moved.

“Get down!” Steve hissed again.

Billy glanced around the room, as if confirming the absence of an audience, and knelt in front of the couch with the air of someone half-heartedly humoring a deranged child. The anger had cleared from his face like the passing of a summer squall, and now he just looked bemused in a pleasant, almost gentlemanly fashion. Steve could imagine him frowning and saying “*my liege?*” in a politely differential tone.

He smacked the palm of his hand flat on Billy’s shoulder and pushed him the remaining distance to the ground. Billy, caught off guard, ended up sprawled inelegantly on his hands and knees on the carpet. There was a sour expression of what Steve thought looked like surprised betrayal on his face for a second when he first looked up.

“Christ Harrington,” he whispered, starting to rise and shrugging off Steve’s hand roughly, “What’s got you so jumpy?”

Steve snagged his fingers in Billy’s shirt and yanked him back down. “What if it’s the army?” Steve breathed.

Billy paled. He seized Steve’s wrist, his face turning a sickly sea-green.

Soft foot falls sounded on the sidewalk in front of Steve’s house and they both froze. Billy was so close Steve could smell his hair, the faint odor of smoke and something bitter underneath it, almost chemical. His palm was damp against Steve’s skin, and Steve felt the walls start to close in again, his attention zeroing in on the sounds outside and the feeling of Billy’s fingers around his wrist like an anchor, or a shackle.

There came the scuff of shoes on the stoop and someone rapped twice against the front door, hard and clear.

Billy turned his head to look at Steve. His lips parted. The pink tip of his tongue came to rest against his incisors.

Steve was staring at Billy’s mouth and holding his breath when a voice called through the front door: “Steve!”

Nancy.

Billy's death grip on Steve relaxed all at once and he let go, the smug mask he'd worn all morning descending back over his face. He smirked and stretched out his long legs.

"Oh look," Billy whispered, calm and detached again, "another girl who doesn't want to fuck you."

Steve scowled. "Just be quiet until she leaves," he hissed.

Nancy banged on the door again. "Steve!," she yelled, "I know you're in there. Jonathan needs his car back!"

Steve cursed under his breath and rubbed at his temples. Nancy could tell when he was upset, she'd always been able to. That was what made her a good journalist—she had a nose for things. Steve knew if he told her about Billy, she'd demand to be involved, and the thing was, Nancy couldn't be involved in something without taking it over. Once Steve had made the mistake of telling Nancy he wanted to work on his backstroke. He hadn't been really serious about it or anything, swimming was something he just did for fun. But Nancy had shown up at his house a day later with a meticulously crafted two week fitness plan detailing mandatory exercises down to the hour. He'd tried to follow her schedule, he really had, until Nancy's constant haranguing about "follow-through" and "self discipline" leeched all the enjoyment out of it for him and he'd eventually given up.

Nancy knocked a third time, and Steve looked over at Billy. He looked completely at home on the carpet, and leaned back against the couch with his hands spread in a kind of mockingly indulgent '*be my guest*' gesture.

Steve rolled his eyes.

He scrambled up and fished Jonathan's keys out of a decorative porcelain bowl on a side table in the foyer where he'd absentmindedly dumped them the night before. The metal was cool on his sweaty palms.

"Coming Nanc," he called.

Steve stopped before he opened the door, one hand braced on the frame. He combed through his hair with his fingers, aware of Billy watching him from the floor. When he was finished, Steve shot a pointed glare at Billy and put a finger to his lips. Billy sneered, but mimed zipping his mouth closed. Steve figured that was the best he could get.

He cracked open the front door and peeked out. "Hey Nancy," he said.

Nancy looked exhausted. She was draped in an oversized rain slicker Steve knew belonged to Mike, and her socks were dripping on Steve's welcome mat. She stared dubiously at the sliver of Steve's face visible to her.

"Hey Steve," she said slowly.

"Here," Steve said and squeezed his fist through the narrow opening.

He opened his hand and dangled the keys by Mrs Byers' snap-in photo keychain, on which an unsmiling Will glared out from under poorly trimmed bangs.

Nancy took the keys gingerly, with the air of someone being passed a live grenade. She didn't take her eyes off Steve's face. "Thanks," she said.

"Well, bye!" Steve chirped and had almost gotten the door shut when Nancy stuck a slender hand through and caught the edge of the door in an iron grip. There was a brief push-pull as Nancy tried to yank the door farther open and Steve had to fight to keep it cracked.

After a moment of struggle Nancy gave up and retracted her hand. "Is everything okay, Steve?" she said. She had the slightly pinched look she always got when things didn't go her way.

"Um," Steve said.

He glanced towards the living room and saw Billy inching up the front of the couch on his belly, clearly aiming to peek out the window. Steve coughed loudly and slapped the door with the flat of his hand.

“No!” he hissed.

Billy paused and coolly raised an eyebrow.

“No, you’re not okay?” Nancy asked.

Steve’s head whipped back to her. “No! I mean yes.”

He looked back at the couch. Billy widened his eyes and nodded encouragingly. ‘*Doing great*’ he mouthed. Steve flung daggers at him with his eyes.

“No,” he said, facing Nancy again. “No, I’m not okay. I’m upset...About Hopper.”

Nancy continued to squint suspiciously at him. “How do you know about Hopper?”

Shit, Steve thought.

Billy’s chin was resting on the back of the couch, his nose inches from the glass. Steve could see the bottom of his bare feet sticking off the couch cushion.

“O-oh,” Steve stuttered. He stuck his arm out as far as he could reach into the living room and flapped his hand violently at Billy. Billy responded by cupping his fingers around his ear and looking confused.

“Steve!” Nancy snapped. “Is someone in there with you?”

Billy flinched at her tone and slid back down to the carpet.

“No-no one’s here I-I—” Steve looked wildly at Billy for inspiration and Billy sighed. He mimed rubbing at his eyes with his fists.

Steve stared at him in incomprehension. “Allergies...?” Steve said.

“You’re having allergies?” Nancy repeated.

Billy shook his head vigorously at Steve and made a slashing motion

across his throat. He jabbed a finger at his eye and then trailed it down from his eye to his jaw.

Oh.

Steve took a haggard breath and leaned heavily into the door, like standing up straight was too much of an effort. He willed tears to well up. "I'm sorry, Nanc," Steve said, and made his voice crack. "I'm just...trying not to cry. Dustin called and told me about Hopper this morning."

Nancy's face cleared immediately and deep sympathy swam up in her eyes. "Oh Steve, I know it's awful," she sighed. "El is—" Nancy shrugged, her mouth tight and thin. "Well, you can imagine. Everyone has taken it really hard. Last night—"

She cut herself off to take a fortifying breath. As Steve watched, Nancy's face rearranged through sheer force of will, as though her pain was leftover food she had carefully boxed up for later. She was a calm, collected investigative journalist again.

"Speaking of last night, why did you leave so quickly?" she asked. Steve could imagine her mentally flipping open a little spiral to take down notes.

He gripped the door.

"I was—" Steve thought hard. He had to say something she wouldn't question. "I—I had a-a freak out," he stammered.

The words punched out of his mouth and ran together in a great rush. For a moment he thought he'd made a mistake, but the effect was gratifyingly immediate.

Nancy deflated. "Oh Steve," she said, sounding almost disappointed, "another one?"

Steve felt himself pale.

"I thought you were over all that."

Steve shrugged tightly and looked at the ground. "Yeah well, I guess

not,” he said.

To his right the living room was as silent as a tomb.

“After everything goes back to normal, you should go see that psychiatrist again,” Nancy went on. Steve’s ears were burning. “Promise me, okay? I don’t want things to get as bad as they were last time.”

Steve’s midsection felt numb, like he’d been split in half. He remembered waking up screaming next to Nancy, once, twice, how she’d held him and stroked his hair. “*My God son,*” his father had roared one evening when Steve was eight or nine and had burst into tears over something he could no longer remember, “*you’re a fucking weakling!*”

Steve couldn’t make himself look back at the couch. “I promise,” he managed, and felt the words curdle in the back of his throat like rotten milk.

Nancy relented with a heavy sigh and searched his face for a moment. “If you need anything, you can call me,” she said. She sounded reluctant to leave.

“Of course,” Steve said, and grimaced his way through his best imitation of a reassuring smile.

He couldn’t take any more of this. Steve closed the door on Nancy’s pinched face with a wince and stood there listening until Nancy unlocked the Byers sedan and climbed behind the wheel. She reversed down the long driveway without a hitch and sped off, the sedan’s exhaust pipe coughing out little backfires the whole way.

Steve took a deep breath, like a swimmer readying himself for a deep dive.

Billy had heard it, all of it, and Steve, tallying up everything Nancy had let slip on his fingers, figured he now had oh, just enough ammo to mock Steve multiple times a minute for the remainder of minutes he had left—in this go around and about the next forty ones following.

Steve put his hands over his face and sucked in another deep breath. Ten to one Billy was going to make a crack about Steve getting his head “shrunk”, like he’d been cast as the bully in one of those shitty educational videos from the sixties the teachers showed in school.

Well, Steve could handle it. He’d just successfully lied to Nancy, and she was the scariest person he knew. Steve steeled himself for the volley of insults and turned into the living room like a man approaching the executioner’s chamber.

He blinked.

The couch was...empty. The carpet and the pale pink ottoman were equally unoccupied. Billy, miraculously, was nowhere in sight. Steve almost didn’t hear the sound of the refrigerator door closing over his audible sigh of relief. He passed a slightly shaky hand over his face again.

Billy’s complete disinterest in Steve’s general existence had unforeseen positive side effects. It was almost offensive that he hadn’t bothered to get as much dirt on Steve as he could, but even Steve could feel that line of thinking was a little much. He should feel relieved. Scratch that, he *was* relieved. Being the focus of Billy’s attention was unanimously worse than being ignored by him, Steve told himself while he slunk upstairs, his proverbial tail between his legs.

Still, he figured he could use a nap before he had to face Billy’s indifference head on.

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

Ooooh my god this was a nightmare to write! I've been working on this chapter for like the last four months hahah. I hope y'all enjoy it! Thanks so much to everyone who commented on the last chapter! TW for violence at the end of the chapter

Much to Steve's relief, Billy barricaded himself in the Harringtons' bedroom and refused to come out for the remainder of the afternoon—giving Steve ample license to drowse on the couch and eat cereal out the box with his hands.

Around 8 o'clock, Steve wandered into the den and caught Billy staring out the sliding glass door at the pool.

After Barb's disappearance, Steve's imagination began supplying him with images of creatures swimming under the water's surface, lying in wait for him in the shallows. He'd rigged the pool lights to stay on 24/7 as a precaution against bad thoughts.

Now in the post-storm semi-darkness, the water shone with an eerie, almost supernatural glow. Billy was standing so close to the glass door the pool's reflection painted his skin a sickly shade of green. He looked tired.

Steve hesitated in the doorway, a greeting evaporating on his tongue. This was *his* house, but he felt like an intruder. Billy just looked so...far-away. Lost, like a little kid. He clearly didn't know Steve was there.

Before Steve could make a move, a floorboard squeaked under his foot. Billy stiffened like a wind-up toy, and brushed by without so much as a glance. Steve heard him firmly close the master bedroom door and pointedly lock it. Steve stole all the boxes of cereal out of

the kitchen in retaliation.

Afterwards he soaked in the tub for a long time, his ears submerged so everything sounded muffled and distant, his leg hair gently waving in the water like seaweed. Steve stayed in until his fingers grew prune, then towed off and tucked himself into bed.

Not once, the entire time he'd been in the bath, had he heard a single sign of life from downstairs. Not an errant creak or flush of a toilet.

Despite himself, Steve had routinely resurfaced, water streaming out of his ears, and heaved himself up on the side of the tub to listen for a minute or two before giving up and resuming his dead man's float. Initially he figured Billy was catching up on sleep, but after several sustained hours of silence Steve began to wonder if Billy had just skipped out the back door and headed home.

Fuck him, was Steve's thought on the matter. He snuggled down in bed and fluffed up his pillow.

Steve was perfectly capable of figuring everything out on his own. He'd saved Billy anyway, who by all accounts should have died or at least been taken into custody—which meant Steve was making the life equivalent of a *C minus* on this cycle, and he'd coasted his entire junior year on the motto "Cs get degrees." He was doing just adequate, thank you very much.

Steve's drowsy gaze fell on the glossy, open page of the car magazine on his bedside table. The handsome Nascar driver stared unseeingly back at him again, grinning benevolently from the hood of his Formula one. His blonde hair was so rich a color it looked streaked with gold, smooth and glinting in the sunlight.

Steve narrowed his eyes and fished one hand out from under the comforter. He prodded the magazine with one finger and tipped it to the floor with a *thwap*.

Satisfied, Steve rolled over and slowly drifted off.

Sometime—maybe a long time, he couldn't tell—later the telephone rang downstairs. Steve's eyes opened blearily in the dark. The phone

rang on and on, blaring through the house, until the answering machine came to life with a low whirl. A small click signaled the caller had hung up.

After a pause lasting the approximate length of time it took for someone to hit redial, the phone rang again. This time it rang and rang with no sign of stopping, like it had become sentient and intended to ring all night.

Steve expelled a beleaguered sigh and shifted so he could start peeling off the layers of his many blankets. Before he could make his way out from under the pile, a door opened downstairs. Someone stomped into the kitchen, moving heavily.

Billy. He'd stayed after all.

Steve listened to him pick up the receiver and slam it back into the cradle again. Then the tale-tell sound of the telephone cord being yanked out of the wall—a technique Mr. Harrington also utilized when he thought Steve's friends were calling too often on weekends.

Footsteps plodded back across the tile, and the door to the Harrington's bedroom snapped closed again.

Turned out Billy was useful for something after all.

Steve was snoring before his eyes even closed properly.

The sound of glass breaking brought Steve violently and totally out of a deep sleep. He came awake all at once, with none of the usual residual confusion, like his brain had flipped on with a switch.

Fear, a blind scrabbling animal fear, lit up his nerves like a string of Christmas lights, and his breath came short and strained—and then Steve remembered Billy.

Billy. It was only Billy.

Steve let out a ragged exhale. The summer sun shone cheerfully into Steve's bedroom, illuminating the tiny dust motes floating in the air

conditioner's cool draft.

Billy was in the den maybe, fucking around with one of Mrs. Harrington's knick-knacks, or he'd dropped a cup on the hardwood floor on his way back to bed.

Steve told himself these plausible explanations while he got out of bed and toed on his sneakers.

Probably Billy was doing one of his '*nobody understands me*' routines, and he'd smashed a mirror with his bare fist. Or maybe Billy could make the sound of breaking glass with his mouth, like one of those weird kids who did bizarrely accurate imitations of birdsong.

Steve pulled on a soft gray t-shirt. There were enough alarms going off in Steve's head to play 'Carol of the Bells.'

To be fair, his internal warning system had a hair-trigger lately—and it sounded at inappropriate times too, like when Steve went into an unfamiliar place and his mind started screaming "*Run, run,*" even though he was only at a restaurant and the flayer was dead, had been dead for months, and he was safe *Steve, you're safe.*

Still. It wouldn't hurt to check. Steve snatched up the bat he had stashed in his closet and hefted it in his hand, feeling the perfectly balanced distribution of weight.

The bat was a Louisville Slugger his dad had bought for him on his fifteenth birthday, because he'd wanted Steve to try out for the freshman baseball team. Baseball was the only thing Steve's dad ever really cared about. When Steve didn't make the team, Mr Harrington had shaken his head and said: "I knew it."

That was back before Steve stopped caring about his dad's opinion.

Steve ducked through his bedroom door and stepped out into the hall.

The house felt heavy and unnaturally silent, like even the brick walls were holding their breath. He could hear the steady tick of the clock in the living room and the hum of the water tank. Steve crept across the carpet to the stairs and descended slowly on the balls of his feet.

A faint rattling noise drifted up from below.

The kids couldn't be breaking in again. Steve hadn't done anything odd enough to warrant *that* rash of a decision, and besides, Dustin always left a voicemail when he called. The person who had rung the house the night before had just hung-up.

No, the sounds had to be coming from Billy. Maybe Billy could make a rattling noise with his mouth—

Steve almost screamed when Billy materialized out of the gloom in the foyer. He'd been standing in the shadows in his stocking feet, one hand tucked behind him, while Steve was on the stairs.

Steve straightened up in a hurry.

Billy looked like he'd had a bad night. There were deep hollows under his eyes, and his face was puffy.

He glanced at Steve's bat and quirked a manicured eyebrow. "Got one in every room, Harrington?" he whispered.

Steve flushed and lowered the bat until it hung partially obscured behind his leg.

"I'm a collector," Steve sniffed.

Steve had reason to be sensitive. Nancy had always seemed to think '*the bat thing*' was proof of Steve's deepening and worrisome paranoia, as if bats were a gateway drug which lead to wearing tinfoil hats and running off to live in the woods.

Billy just shrugged and inclined his head, like he knew Steve was bullshitting him and didn't care.

"Smart," he said, with something like begrudging respect. He brought an aluminum bat of his own out from behind his back. The bat was one of Steve's more recent purchases, and he'd had it stashed under his parents bed. It glinted in the half-light.

They eyed each other a little warily, almost sheepish. *I won't say anything if you don't*, Billy's face said. Steve ran his tongue along his

teeth.

"I'm guessing that wasn't you?" he said finally, jerking his chin towards the living room.

Billy grimaced. "Thought it was you."

Steve's stomach plummeted.

They squinted into the next room. The den was empty and undisturbed, the curtains drawn across the front window, the pillows on the couch where Steve had left them. A fat wedge of sunlight spilled into the room through the kitchen doorway. As Steve watched, a shadow blotted out the light and then moved away.

Steve looked over at Billy and Billy nodded tightly—he'd seen it.

"Watch my six," Steve hissed, raising the bat and starting forward.

He didn't need to look to know Billy was moving in tandem with him, each of his steps perfectly in-sync with Steve's. He'd dogged Steve on the court like that, too; sometimes Steve would find himself cornered, no one to pass to, and then Billy would suddenly appear in a sea of the opposing team and the ball would float effortlessly from Steve's hands into Billy's, like it was a magnet attracted by an opposite pole. Coach Williams had lamented on more than one occasion that if Billy and Steve would just communicate—for god's sake—together they could take the team to state.

As he neared the kitchen, Steve began to make out the muffled sounds of a hushed argument, the voices too low to understand but the tones fevered.

He faltered. *No fucking way*, he thought. It didn't make sense. He'd left the mall the other night in a hurry, sure, but he hadn't run off screaming into the woods again.

Billy tapped his shoulder. 'What?' he mouthed.

Steve shook his head. He motioned for Billy to stay back and stepped into the kitchen's entryway with such a decisive snap of his heels he would have made any lieutenant proud.

The sunlight streaming through the back door fell square on Steve's face and momentarily blinded him. "Gah!" Steve yelled, and raised a hand to shield his eyes.

The kids clustered around the open backpack jumped simultaneously, like they were in a Scooby-Doo cartoon, and Lucas screamed. Max, leaning by the back door, cleared her throat as though embarrassed.

"Hi Steve," Will said. He had the resigned air of someone who had repeatedly stated his opposition to a plan, and had now been proved right.

Dustin and Mike just waved guiltily, while Lucas surveyed Steve with an odd gleam in his eye. He hadn't removed his hand from the bowels of the backpack.

Steve pointed his bat at Lucas' nose.

"Don't you dare. If I see that slingshot, I'll take it from you and snap it in two, I swear to god."

Lucas extricated his hand from the bag and grinned nervously. "Who said anything about a slingshot?"

"It's the brats," Billy said from behind Steve. He sounded more bemused than anything, his voice still sleep-rough.

The kids reacted like they'd seen a ghost.

"He's here?" Lucas burst out.

Dustin's lips parted in a little O of surprise. "Oh my god we're so fu—" he began, and then shut his mouth with a click when Will punched his arm. They looked at Max, who had shot up straight at the sight of him. Her cheeks were flushed.

"Billy?"

Billy stiffened. His hand went to his wounded side, like he was checking to make sure his bandage was secure. Steve realized he must not have noticed Max until she spoke.

“Are you alright, Billy?”

She reached out, and something flashed in Billy’s eyes. For a moment he looked almost afraid. Then his expression shuttered closed, his mouth hardening, and he looked away.

“I’m fine,” he said. He sounded strained.

Steve found himself inching in front of Billy. Something was happening under the mask of indifference on Billy’s face, something wild—maybe wounded.

“Not that it’s not lovely to see you guys,” Steve said quickly, trying to bluster his way through the rising tension in the room, “but why are you all in my house?”

The boys exchanged lost looks.

“Well...you...didn’t answer when I called last night,” Dustin said.

Steve stared at him. “So you decided to *break in*?”

Max cut in before Dustin could stutter out an excuse. “It was my idea,” she said and squared her jaw. She gave Steve a fierce glare. “I didn’t tell anyone about Billy, but I needed to know he was okay.”

“And as you can see,” Billy drawled, “I’m just peachy.” He clapped his hands. “Now all the little kiddies can run along home.”

Nobody moved. On the boys’ faces was open dislike. Lucas slipped his hand back into the open pocket of his pack.

Billy rolled his eyes and seized Steve’s shirt-sleeve so he could yank him close and speak directly into Steve’s ear.

“Get them out of here before somebody notices they’re missing and calls the cops,” he hissed. Steve got a whiff of his parents’ peppermint mouthwash and then he released Steve’s sleeve. The skin above Steve’s elbow where Billy’s knuckles had brushed felt scalded.

Steve turned around in time to see Billy stroll out of the kitchen without a backwards glance, but Max wasn’t having it. She pushed

off the back door and went after him.

This was not good. Steve had enough experience with Billy to know he didn't take kindly to being pushed.

Swearing, Steve peered around the doorframe and into the living room.

Billy was standing in the mouth of the foyer with his back to Steve, breathing hard. He must have been moving fast, almost running, to have gotten so far already. Max had stopped a few feet behind him, her feet planted in a fighter's stance on the heavy rug.

Steve heard a rustling noise and looked down to find the boys crowding around the open door beside him. Dustin stuck his fluffy head under Steve's armpit and Lucas and Mike peeked around each of Steve's legs.

Great. Steve was teaching them more bad habits. He had just resolved to shoo them away when Max started speaking.

"I was *worried* about you," she said, flinging the words at Billy's back.

He stiffened, and Steve risked a glance down at Dustin's curly head.

"What did she mean 'it was her idea'?" Steve hissed, nudging Dustin's shoulder.

Dustin looked harassed. "She called you last night and you didn't answer."

"Maybe you should mind your own business," Billy snapped, rounding on Max.

Dustin continued without taking his eyes off the two figures in the living room: "She told us you were acting suspicious."

"Saving her brother is suspicious?"

Dustin shrugged and cut his eyes over at Billy meaningfully. "I mean, he does suck."

Will aggressively shushed them.

“You *are* my business,” Max fired back. Her fists clenched at her sides. “We’re family—“

Billy cut her off. “No, actually, *we’re not*.”

His hand, still clamped to his side, spasmed. His cheeks were bright red, like he’d been slapped. “I don’t know what it’s going to take to get this through your thick head, but read my lips: I’m. Not. Your. Brother.”

Lucas let out a tiny, scandalized huff near Steve’s hip, but Max, undeterred, advanced on Billy. She was shivering with barely controlled fury. “You *are* my brother. You said we’re supposed to look out for each other, to be there for each other, and—“

She took another step towards Billy and something in him seemed to snap.

The mask slipped from his face. He looked horrible. He looked like he wanted to scream and scream and never stop.

Max faltered, and Billy slapped the wall by his head hard with the flat of his hand.

“Let me try something simpler, Maxine,” he said, each word enunciated so clearly they felt like bludgeons, “since basic biology is obviously too hard for you to follow. I don’t care about you. I don’t love you and I don’t want you here. Get. Out.”

Max stood tall against the onslaught until the end, when she started to tremble in the way kids only did when they were about to cry.

Steve had been watching the fight unfold almost dispassionately—like Max and Billy were just characters in a play reading their lines, or like Steve was peeping in someone’s window and observing their private drama—but this, this was real. This was happening in his living room, next to the portrait of his parents, his parents who had said a lot of things to him over the years but never that they didn’t love him—and Steve had heard enough.

“Lay off,” he snapped, stepping out from behind the door frame.

Steve remembered the look on Max’s face when she’d asked him to save Billy—both of them huddled on his doorstep, and Max splitting open at the seams, Billy something shining and good she couldn’t stand losing.

“Christ, what’s wrong with you? You like to bully girls for sport, or is it just for fun?”

Steve moved towards Max. She whirled around, ducking her chin so her hair hid her face. For a moment, Steve thought she was going to crash into his arms, but she veered by him at the last second and disappeared into the kitchen. Steve heard the back door open and slam shut.

Billy turned his terrible gaze towards Steve. “King Steve saves the day,” he spat.

He was sweating lightly, his mouth curled into a sneer Steve found less and less convincing the more he examined it. Even the look in his eyes seemed more wild than angry.

“Someone had to,” Steve said.

Billy didn’t take the bait. He only winced and pressed his palm into the lump of bandages below his ribs, then stepped backwards. “Get them out of here,” he croaked, his face pale, and disappeared down the hall.

The house seemed to settle back on its foundation. The thickness in the air thinned as though the living room itself had released a breath.

Steve turned around to find Dustin, Mike, and Will blinking at him from the kitchen doorway where they’d returned to spying, and he shrugged his shoulders at them with the confused relief of someone who has just been fired at point-blank and found himself miraculously unscathed.

Only Will didn’t return Steve’s rueful grin; his eyes were trained on the dark hall thoughtfully, a little crease between his eyebrows.

"Let's go outside," Steve sighed, and out they went.

The backyard was damp from the storm and coated in fallen leaves, as if autumn had come early. In the air was an oppressive humidity. The pool water had begun to emit the distinctly mildewy smell it sometimes developed when Steve hadn't cleaned and refreshed the chlorine in a while.

He stalked through the grass to the pool deck and gingerly perched on the back of a slick lawn chair. The boys joined him and stood facing Steve in a loose semi-circle.

"So, was there something you guys needed?" Steve asked, "Or did you just wanna practice breaking and entering? Zero out of ten by the way, my arthritic grandma could have been quieter."

"I guess Max just wanted to check on Billy," Dustin said, spreading his hands. His mouth quirked unhappily. "Turns out being possessed only made him more of a dick."

Steve tried not to think of Max's face crumpling in the living room and Mike grimaced, obviously thinking of the same thing. He shouldered his backpack. "We should get home, my mom didn't want me out late."

Lucas and Max were long gone, their footsteps easy to make out in the mud by the unlatched gate. The remaining kids' bikes were dumped behind a bush on the side of Steve's house, their once bright frames now marred by dust.

As he turned to go, Dustin shook his head incredulously and snatched off his hat to swipe a suntanned hand across his sweaty forehead. "I just hope you know what you're doing, Steve," he said, sounding grown up and faintly disapproving. "I mean we've been in some deep shit before, but the last time we harbored a fugitive things did not end well."

"Wait," Steve said. "What? A fugitive?"

The boys exchanged looks. "You don't know?"

Steve stood up, a leaden pit forming in his stomach. “No, I obviously don’t know.”

“It’s all over the news, man,” Mike said accusingly.

Steve reigned in the overwhelming urge to shake Mike’s narrow shoulders. “Yeah, well, this might come as a shock, but I haven’t really had time to watch a lot of TV lately. I’ve kinda had my hands full.”

Mike just shook shook his head and sighed long-sufferingly. “Dustin, you tell him,” he said.

When Steve looked over at Dustin, he found his eyes lit up with the manic gleam of someone relishing a juicy piece of gossip. “The whole army is looking for Billy,” Dustin said, and tried to rearrange his face to look appropriately grave. “It’s like, a state-wide manhunt. He’s wanted for mass murder.”

Steve had been crouched in front of the TV for all of three minutes before the magnitude of how fucked they were set in.

A picture of Billy’s face from the Hawkin’s High yearbook occupied a permanent spot in the corner of the broadcast, and a scrolling ticker tape with the police tipline’s number looped around the bottom of the screen. Bookending the phone number was a warning that said, in all caps, SUBJECT CONSIDERED ARMED AND DANGEROUS, DO NOT APPROACH.

The news anchor, a sweaty man who looked like he’d been formed with soft pastry dough, informed audiences that William Hargrove was wanted in connection to a number of mysterious disappearances, and that his blood had been found at the scene of the gas explosion at Starcourt.

There was an aerial shot of a demolished Starcourt, and then the camera lingered on the image of a suburban street full of cops tugging the leashes of barely restrained sniffer dogs, helicopter searchlights beaming down and illuminating everything through the

trees. A teaser before the commercial break showed news crews camped in front of the Hargrove house, and capped everything off with a smash cut of a freshman girl Steve only vaguely knew snapping her gum and saying “There was always something off about the guy, you know? He seemed I dunno—“

“Violent?” the interviewer supplied.

“Scary,” the girl replied, and smiled for her close up.

As near as Steve could tell, the authorities’ current theory was that Billy had detonated a bomb at Starcourt, killing around a hundred Hawkins residents in the blast—or at least, that was the story the army was pushing. Either way, people were dead and Billy was the perfect scapegoat.

After Dustin dropped the “fugitive” bombshell, Steve had hustled the boys out the back gate and made them promise to take the long way home.

“He didn’t kill anyone,” Steve had said, one hand on the damp wood of the fence, his shoes sticking in the mud, not knowing why he was bothering to defend Billy. “It was the flayer.”

“We know,” Mike said.

Will, who probably knew best of all, only swallowed and said quietly, “Do you think *Billy* knows that?”

Steve thought of the almost pained weariness on Billy’s face during the car ride home.

“Who cares?” Dustin had burst out. “He would have killed Steve last year if Max hadn’t stopped him, so he’s not exactly innocent. All that matters is that Steve doesn’t get dragged down with him.”

Will caught Steve’s eye before he clambered into his bike and stared him down.

He was clearly trying to convey something with his solemn little face—his face that still looked wounded sometimes, even when he was surrounded by his friends, even in the bright lights of the arcade, like

he'd been brought out of some dark place and was still adjusting to the sun, like maybe all of him hadn't come out of that dark place after all.

Steve couldn't guess what Will wanted from him, but he nodded at the kid like he understood. Will had blinked owlishly and then took off, and soon the boys were just specks in the distance.

Steve switched the TV off as a commercial for furniture polish began to play. The house was quiet again.

For how long? Steve thought. How long until someone had the bright idea that the captain of Billy's basketball team might have some idea of his whereabouts?

People knew Steve was friendly with the kids, Max included. Wanting to interview Steve wouldn't be too much of a deductory stretch for a detective with half a brain cell. Steve figured they had a day at most, less if someone talked to one of the kids and they broke under questioning.

Steve climbed to his feet with his heart pounding in his throat. He stood in the foyer for a moment, shifting his weight from one foot to the next, until he could breathe regularly again and then he edged down the hall towards the firmly shut door of the master bedroom.

He knocked. Waited. Nothing.

Okay, fine.

"Billy!" Steve called, and winced at the sound of his voice in the quiet. "We need to talk."

The house remained silent. Steve put his hands on his hips and sighed. After a pause he knocked again.

"Hey!" He tried sounding jovial. "You gotta open up."

Still no response. Steve reached for the door handle, certain he'd find it locked, but the knob turned smoothly in his hand and the door

opened on well-oiled hinges.

Steve hesitated on the threshold. At first glance, the room was as still and lifeless as it had been the night Steve brought Billy through to the bathroom. The early afternoon light poured through the blinds and painted bright stripes on the meticulously-made comforter. Even the thin layer of dust coating the bedside tables remained undisturbed.

Steve turned and looked bewilderedly back down the empty hall, like Billy might have crept up behind him while he wasn't paying attention, but Steve was alone.

He guessed Billy *technically* could have snuck out while Steve was in the backyard, but that didn't seem likely. Billy hadn't exactly looked the picture of health the last time Steve had seen him, and even Billy wouldn't try to make a break for it on foot.

Steve poked his head into the bedroom and looked around again.

This time he noticed the bloody pair of jeans carefully folded on the wardrobe, the remnants of Billy's tattered tank top draped on top of it. A stray beam of sunlight glinted off a water glass abandoned on the window sill, half-hidden in the shadows.

Steve took a few steps towards the bed.

On the carpet in front of the restroom, partially obscured by the hulking mass of the wardrobe, was one perfectly round spot of blood, like the dot in an exclamation point.

Steve went cold.

"Billy...?" he said slowly, and padded over to the closed bathroom door.

The faucet was running. A muffled sound came from inside— a human noise too rough to be a whimper, but unmistakably pained. Cabinets opened and closed audibly, and someone pulled open a drawer and rifled through a collection of what could only be pill bottles and cosmetic samples.

Steve reached up to knock, but changed his mind and laid his hand flat on the wood instead. A knock would be too loud, too jarring. Steve wasn't even sure he'd be able to hear it over the hammering in his chest anyway.

Something was wrong.

"Billy," he said and heard his voice come out low and easy, the way he spoke to his grandma when he called her nursing home on holidays.

He flushed.

"We need to talk," Steve said, going for firm.

The rattling sounds stopped. Steve leaned in close so his forehead was almost touching the smooth wood of the door, his ears straining against the ringing silence. "There's some shit you should know about."

The rattling sounds started up again, as if Billy had immediately lost interest—which of course, why wouldn't he have, he was only going to make the national news— and Steve heard the distinct sound of ripping tape. A vein throbbed in Steve's forehead. He squeezed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger and made another attempt.

"The *cops* are at your place."

The rustling sounds carried on as if Steve hadn't spoken.

Asshole, Steve thought. *Asshole, asshole, asshole*—He hit the door hard with the flat of his hand. "Hey, this is serious! They're gonna come here looking for you eventually, and the cops will arrest me for aiding and abetting a fugitive."

Steve tried the door. It was locked.

He rattled it hard with both hands, slightly hysterically. "I'm not fucking around Hargrove," he babbled, "I'm really not fucking around. If you don't open up in five seconds I swear to god I'll—"

Billy yanked open the door from the inside, ripping the doorknob out of Steve's grip with one smooth jerk. Steve lost his balance and stumbled bodily into the door, bounced off, and fell flat on his ass. He blinked at his hands in mild surprise.

Billy emerged from the bathroom head first, like some kind of freakishly handsome jack-in-the-box. He looked down at Steve and snorted.

"Fascinating stuff, Harrington," he said. "We need more bandages."

The sky had opened up again and an icy cold mist was falling when Steve and Billy slipped through the garden gate and headed towards Ned's.

Naturally, Steve thought going to Ned's was a terrible idea and Billy didn't care. Going out in public was a needless risk. Billy maintained that his bloody side begged to differ.

They had squabbled in the Harrington's bedroom until Billy held up three fingers and promised to keep a low profile, *Scout's Honor*, and Steve felt marginally better after he forced him into one of his dad's old hoodies.

Now Billy walked with his head down, his arm stiffly plastered to his bad side. The hood of his pull-over was up so his face was partially obscured. At any given time Steve could only make out the curve of one cheek and the side of his mouth.

Steve looked sidelong at him. "Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"I told you, Harrington, I need more bandages."

Billy had been surprisingly civil since he came out of the bathroom. Steve hadn't said anything more about Max, and Billy was behaving like nothing had happened. It was the longest they'd gone without an argument in the entire time Steve had known him.

Billy must have caught Steve's frown because he sighed, and then

said begrudgingly “It’s,” his mouth worked grimly, “oozing.”

Steve took a step towards him. “Let me take a look.”

“Why the hell would I let you do that? If I say I need more bandages, I need more fucking bandages.”

“It could be infected.”

“Yeah, it *could* be, but it’s not,” Billy retorted. “You think I don’t know what an infected wound looks like?”

Steve sighed. They’d been through all this before, after Billy had opened the bathroom door. He wouldn’t let Steve look at his side, and he wouldn’t let Steve go out alone.

Plan was—pick up bandages, quickly jaunt back home to let Billy deal with whatever was going on under the gauze pads, and then Steve would try to call Robin. If they were lucky, she’d answer and let them camp out at her place for a while.

Steve thought this was an even shittier plan than the ones the kids usually came up with, but there was something almost manic about Billy’s repeated insistence on going to Ned’s that made Steve not want to argue too hard.

Everything would be okay. Probably.

The steady drizzle gradually evolved into outright rain, and the gloomy cast to the day made the deserted neighborhood seem even more desolate. Several houses still sat with their front doors standing open like the residents had just stepped out to check the mail, the lights blazing and the gingham curtains wide—but for the most part diligent neighbors had returned the street’s appearance to a semblance of normality.

What really bothered Steve was the quiet.

On any regular stormy afternoon, screaming kids could be found splashing in puddles up and down the street. Old folks liked to sit in the weathered chairs on their front porches with radios tuned to the weather channel. Now though, there wasn’t a soul outside. Nobody

even peeked out a window at them.

"I've never seen it like this," Steve muttered, mostly just to break the oppressive silence. He drew closer to Billy.

"Like what?"

But it was obvious the empty streets were getting to Billy, too. He was looking around intently, the shadows under his eyes more pronounced than usual.

"Like...a ghost town."

Billy laughed tonelessly. "And who's fault is that?"

He was scrutinizing his nails when Steve turned around to look at him. They were cracked and embedded with dirt. Steve thought Billy looked almost *vulnerable* in the too-big hoodie, more like his sister than he ever had.

Will's words in the garden came back to Steve like they were carried on the breeze. *Do you think he knows that?*

Steve sighed. Being nice sucked. "It's not your fault," he said gently.

Billy stopped walking so abruptly Steve almost smacked into his broad back.

"That's funny," he said. "Did I say it was?" His voice was hard and flat, full of an ugly, simmering bitterness.

Steve recoiled. "What?"

"Did I say it was my fault?"

"No—"

"Is that what you think?" Billy stood rigid, his hoodie gradually darkening in the rain. "You think it's my fault all those people are dead?"

Steve could feel his face reddening in the chill. "What, are you deaf?"

he said, "I just said it *wasn't* your fault."

He'd known their brief civility had been too good to be true, but this felt different. More dangerous.

"You think any of those people would have given a shit if I lived or died? Do you think any of them would have shed a fucking tear over me?"

No, Steve thought.

Billy could see it in his face. "Yeah," he spat, "that's what I thought. Don't lie to me, I know you're thinking it. It *is* my fault they're dead." He stepped closer to Steve, his fists balled at his side. "...But here's a fucking newsflash for you, Harrington, *I don't care*. If the choice was them or me, I choose me. I always choose me."

"Whatever you say," Steve muttered.

He was over it. He was cold and wet and he didn't really give a shit about what was going on in Billy's head. If Billy needed bandages then Steve would go get them, and if he needed to rage and scream, then Steve would let him do it. Then Steve would go home and try to figure out how to get back to his old life on his own.

Billy's shoulders seemed to grow even more tense, but he started walking again. "That's right," he said, his voice harsh.

Steve rolled his eyes when Billy's back was turned.

The large concrete parking lot of Ned's was in sight. Steve swallowed down a lump of anger like it was a sticky wad of peanut butter and jogged after Billy.

In the gloom, the fluorescent lights of the supermarket made the building look like a ship anchored on a foggy sea. The dark wet shapes of the twenty or so cars parked in front of Ned's could have been icebergs buoyed by the same imaginary waves that cradled the store.

Steve caught up to Billy at the perimeter of the parking lot and Billy glanced at him out of the corner of his eye.

“What, did I wound your delicate sensibilities?” he asked.

Steve knocked away a few of the raindrops clinging to his eyelashes with the back of his hand.

“I was just trying—“ he started, putting on the Mature Adult voice he usually reserved for the kids, but Billy cut him off.

”Save it for your shrink,” he said.

Steve froze. The words tore their way through him like he’d swallowed shards of glass, each one sliding down his throat and lodging somewhere tender in his sternum.

“What?” Steve heard himself ask. His voice came out small and wrong.

Billy faced him. ”I heard Wheeler at the door yesterday,” he said. He sounded casual, like he was remarking on the weather. “Big tough Steve Harrington is crazy, right? If anything happens he can’t handle, he has to go cry to his head doctor.”

Steve’s cheeks had caught on fire. The heat spread to his ears and down his neck, pooling in the hollow of his throat. The collar of his shirt had constricted like a yoke.

Billy watched him with mild interest, the way a fisherman eyes his line, waiting to see if something has taken his bait.

Steve took it. He reached out and clamped a sweaty hand on Billy’s arm. “You think you’re funny?” he asked, his voice perfectly steady.

“Not particularly,” Billy said.

A woman swinging a shopping basket exited Ned’s and looked over at them curiously. Billy and Steve paused and looked back.

Billy gave her a little wave and wrenched his arm out of Steve’s grip. “Later,” he hissed.

Now, Steve thought.

All of Steve's higher cognitive processes had failed, his head empty except for a single-minded need to take a swing at Billy, like his brain was a glass bowl with a sticky note that said DECK HIM pasted inside.

Billy reached out lightning fast and shook him once, hard. "Not here," he said.

He let go of Steve before Steve could bat his hand away and booked it across the blacktop without another word.

Steve realized he was shaking.

Billy's comment had done exactly what he'd clearly designed it to do—cut right to the quick of what Steve was most insecure about: his fear. Steve's fear was what kept him up at night, made him hide bats around the house—it dictated where his eyes or thoughts drifted, it made him pause in the middle of pouring sprinkles on some kid's sundae to forcibly swallow down a memory of a demodog snapping at his throat, its breath fetid and sour like the grave.

Not here, not here, Steve chanted to himself, like a spell he could use to keep his fists in check. He thought it over and over until he could force his feet to move, to follow Billy all the way across the parking lot and into the supermarket beyond.

Steve found Billy in the pharmacy, busying himself with the bandages. When Steve rounded the aisle, he glanced up and then grabbed three off-brand boxes of gauze and stuffed a fourth up his hoodie.

Then Billy grabbed a thick roll of tape and Steve momentarily forgot his vow of silence. "You're out of *tape*, too?"

"I'm stocking up on supplies," Billy muttered.

He did not look good under the harsh fluorescents. Steve could see an oily sheen of sweat on Billy's forehead, and there were little strained lines by his mouth. He almost as bad as he'd been in the mall when the flayer was controlling him.

Not my problem, Steve reminded himself. Billy would look a hell of a lot worse when Steve was finished with him anyway.

He looked around at the shelves and snatched up a bottle of rubbing alcohol. At Billy's dark look, Steve smiled sweetly. "I'm stocking up on supplies," he parroted.

Billy mumbled something threatening under his breath, and a woman pushing a shopping cart rattled past them.

"Wrap it up," Steve said, shifting on his feet.

"Not cut out for a life of crime, are you?" Billy said easily, still perusing the shelves.

Another shopper drifted by and Steve, glaring at the long line of Billy's back, didn't look over.

Billy shot up straight, twisting around to hide his face. His expression went carefully blank, like his features had been scoured clean with a scrubber brush. Steve was familiar enough with Billy's moods to know that was a bad sign.

"What?" Steve said as Billy crab walked past him. He ducked around the end of the aisle and Steve tailed him hesitantly.

"I know her," Billy said, studying the mirrors mounted on the wall above him. He shuddered. "Let's get out of here."

Steve was only too happy to comply.

When they neared the registers, Billy shoved the boxes into Steve's arms and strode out through the sliding glass doors, head held high. He broke into a little jog and disappeared across the parking lot.

Steve shook his head and found the shortest line for a register. He was almost at the conveyor belt when a hand tapped his shoulder.

"Steve!" said a familiar voice.

Steve turned to find Mrs. Wheeler smiling tiredly at him.

"I thought that was you," she said warmly. "Nancy told me you were okay, but it's nice to see the proof with my own eyes."

"Good to see you too, Mrs. Wheeler," Steve said.

Truth be told, he'd never really liked Nancy's mom. There was something too made up about her, too disingenuous, like her smiles didn't always meet her eyes.

Nancy had mentioned once, self-righteously scandalized, that her mother had gently tried to suggest marrying Steve would be the financially prudent thing for Nancy to do.

"She actually said," Nancy had huffed, "I should consider the benefits of 'marrying-up.'"

Steve, lovelorn, had asked: "Would that really be so bad?"

And the startled look on Nancy's face had told him everything he needed to know before he was ready to accept it.

Today though, Mrs. Wheeler didn't seem so rigorously kempt. Without the electric blue eyeshadow she looked softer and a little more human. She was still watching Steve sharply though, and he didn't like her probing stare.

"What happened the other night is just a terrible tragedy," she said in hushed tones, placing a limp hand to her breast.

"Right," Steve said and spilled the boxes of bandages onto the conveyor belt behind a bag of someone else's cat food. "It's awful."

What if Mrs. Wheeler asked him to help her carry her groceries out to the car? Older women were always asking him to do that, and then politely inquiring whether or not he wanted a cigarette, or a ride someplace. Steve didn't dare leave Billy alone for too long. Not when Steve's active Neighborhood Watch could be prowling the street.

The teenage cashier leisurely scanned a six pack of diet soda belonging to the man in front of Steve. The man in question was fidgeting, adjusting his hairpiece and making eyes at the cashier.

“What’s even worse,” Mrs. Wheeler continued, ”is that I saw on the news one of your classmates is a ‘person of interest’.”

Steve froze.

“Imagine that! William Hargrove, you know him, right? Well, he goes by Billy, I think. If memory serves you two were on the basketball team together?”

She let out a tittering laugh, but Steve couldn’t see what was funny about it.

Hairpiece seemed to be moving in slow motion, empires rose and fell in the time it took him to pull his wallet out of his back pocket.

“I don’t know him very well,” Steve said with numb lips.

Mrs. Wheeler fastidiously lined up four cans of green beans behind Steve’s bandages.

”I just...don’t feel that he would do anything...like that,” she said, studied the cans with feigned casualness.

“He’s such a sweet boy. Gorgeous too, of course,” she said, and flushed and laughed again, her eyes darting shyly to Steve’s face and then away. “Not that that matters! Just—the other moms and I saw him at the community pool a lot this summer and he was always very kind—“

The glass Steve had swallowed earlier had reformed itself in his stomach, heavier and sharper this time.

He’d heard the rumors, of course he’d heard the rumors. Everyone had.

The rumors about Billy and older women. The gossip was always second-hand; people would say things like ‘a friend of a kid’s mom’s aunt had given Billy a ride somewhere, and then he’d paid her back with a different kind of ride’.

Steve had always discounted the talk as pure fabrication. The women in the stories were married, and Billy was a creep, sure, but he wasn’t

desperate.

But there was something on Mrs. Wheeler's face, something behind the blushing schoolgirl act. A kind of desperation, like she needed to know Billy was okay. Like she was invested.

Steve realized she'd stopped talking and he was staring silently at her. She stared right back, guilt and surprise in her eyes, like she hadn't thought Steve was smart enough to see through her.

"Cash or credit," the bored cashier said, and the moment broke.

"Oh," Steve said and fumbled with his pants pocket.

"I can get that, dear," Mrs. Wheeler said breathlessly and Steve made both of them flinch when he burst out: "No!" too loud.

His hands were shaking. He passed over a crumpled ten and snatched up the plastic bag.

"Bye, Mrs. Wheeler," Steve bit out, and headed for the front door.

"Sir, your change!" the cashier called after him, but Steve didn't stop.

He went barreling out into the misty afternoon and rapidly scanned the horizon. There was a flash of blue just visible through the maze of parked cars at the fringes of the parking lot. Steve took off toward it.

Billy turned at the sound of Steve's footsteps, relaxing for a fraction of a moment until he saw the look on Steve's face.

Then he cringed, his mouth opening like a fish, and Steve clamped a hand down on his arm hard. He drug him a hundred yards to the street, and jerked them to a stop by the curb so violently Billy almost slipped on the damp concrete.

"What the fuck Harrington—"

"Did you fuck Nancy's mom?"

Billy raised an eyebrow. "Pardon?" he said.

Steve shook him. "You heard me," he spat, "Answer the question."

Billy yanked his arm out of Steve's grip and straightened his hoodie.

Steve was panting.

"I don't know Harrington, you remember everyone you sleep with?"

I'm going to kill him, Steve thought. "Did you or did you not fuck Mrs Wheeler? Because she was in there," he jabbed a finger back towards Ned's "—asking about you and sounding pretty fucking torn up about it."

Billy laughed tonelessly, a quick bright flash of his teeth. "Oh, I get it —so being concerned about me is suspicious."

There was a current of bitterness running under his words like a filthy stream. He reached for the bag swinging in Steve's hand and Steve yanked it back out of reach.

"It is suspicious, if the person concerned about you is a married woman your *mother's age*".

The words hit Billy like a bolt of lightning. He stiffened for a moment, like he'd been paralyzed, and then drew himself up to his full height. His hands spasmed, fingers curling like claws.

"You wanna know if I fucked Mrs Wheeler?" he repeated slowly. "Your little girlfriend's mommy." An ugly snarl had transformed Billy's face. His eyes were somehow fever bright and flat at the same time.

"She's not my girlfriend." Steve snapped. He felt himself color reflectively. It was a dumb, teenaged thing to say.

He looked away and saw Mrs Wheeler, just visible in miniature across the parking lot, wheeling her grocery cart towards a wood paneled sedan and moving carefully on the damp ground in her kitten heels. Billy looked too.

They watched her for a tense moment and then Steve said: "I saw the look on her face. I'm not stupid."

"Could have fooled me—and what the hell do you care anyway?" Billy was still speaking in that flat, bored monotone, but he was gaining momentum, gaining force. Something like pleasure sparked in his eyes. He rounded on Steve.

"What, are you jealous you didn't get to her first?"

Steve took a step away. "She's like, forty!"

"Oh okay, so you're upset because you fucked Nancy, which means, what, her mom is your property too, huh? Is that it?"

Steve's face was heating up.

"Speaking of Nancy," Billy went on, leering, "she and her mom have got the same tight little body. Those perky tits are really something...now that would be a combo. Man, can you imagine the two of them—"

The bag dropped from Steve's nerveless fingers. "Shut the fuck up," he snarled and shoved Billy hard in the center of his chest.

Billy stumbled back, and that same strangely glad light shone out of his eyes. "What, do you want to hit me?" he said low, almost a croon. "Is that what you want Harrington? Go ahead, hit me."

Steve didn't move.

"Hit me!"

Billy stood a few feet away, not moving, just standing there, braced for impact.

Steve couldn't understand why he didn't just swing first. There was a wildness in Billy's eyes, the same wildness Steve had seen when he'd picked a fight in the living room. Like he wanted to be hit. Like Billy was trying to get Steve to...punish him, or something, like he thought he deserved it. Only Steve wasn't complying.

All at once Steve's rage drained away.

He was just himself again, tired and cold, and he didn't want to hurt anybody.

"Are you trying to make me hit you?" Steve said.

"How'am I doin' so far?" Billy was still in a fighting stance.

Steve rubbed a hand over his forehead. "Not good." He shrugged his shoulders and gave Billy a helpless look. "I don't want to fight. I just want to—What is your problem, man? You really wanna kick my ass that badly?"

Billy's nostrils flared. He straightened up woodenly, like his joints were locked in place. His mouth was a grim slash. "Give me the fucking bag," he spat.

Steve obediently bent and retrieved the bag from the blacktop. The plastic was slick from the humidity in the air. He held it out.

Billy looked at it and his expression went, if possible, even darker.

"You're too good to fight, is that it?" He snatched the bag and held it balled in his fist, knuckles white. "King Steve turned over a new leaf and now he's a saint."

Steve shook his head and made for the sidewalk. "Forget it," he muttered.

"No," Billy said, and his voice was so commanding Steve stopped in his tracks. "You asked me what my problem is? It's you being so fucking phony."

Steve turned to face him. "Phony?" he repeated.

"Yeah. I've heard the stories. About you ruling the school, about how much of an asshole you were. You know, I even heard you liked to make as many freshmen cry on the first day of class as you could. And imagine my surprise, when I get here you've been fucking cowed by some prissy little valedictorian. It's phony."

Steve opened his mouth and Billy silenced him with a slash of his hand. “The phoniest thing of all though, was that little routine yesterday.”

“Routine?”

“Yeah, with Wheeler.”

Steve froze.

Billy put on a warbling falsetto and said breathlessly: “Oh Steve, don’t have a shit fit again, it gets in the way of my studies. Go get your head shrunk, please? For me?”

“You have no idea—” Steve started and Billy cut him off.

“You see, it just doesn’t fit with all the stories. It’s phony. The thing I can’t figure out is why. Why do all this for some bitch?”

“Don’t call her that—“

”Oh yeah? What are you gonna do to stop me? Hit me? See, we both know you’re not going to. So maybe you’ve just gone soft. Or crazy. But what the hell does a rich little boy like you have to go crazy about? Oh, absolutely fucking nothing. You’re just weak. Steve Harrington, spoiled fucking headcase.”

Thunder roiled overhead.

Something flashed inside Steve’s chest over and over, like a broken little machine sending off electric pulses.

“Man you don’t have a clue,” he gasped. “I have a perfect life right? You think what, this is the first time the flayer’s been crawling around Hawkins?”

“The flayer...?”

”That thing!” Steve pointed north, towards the smoldering ruins of the mall.

”You don’t even know what it’s called. It’s the fucking—mind flayer!

It did the same thing it did to you to the Byers kid last winter! It killed Nancy's best friend in my backyard!"

Billy recoiled.

"You're so fucking smart, but you didn't know any of that, did you? Well, I've been fighting it since the first time it showed up. You have no idea what it's like, knowing that thing is out there, not knowing if it's coming back to kill you, or someone you care about, or if this is the time it finally wins—"

"I have no idea what it's like?" Billy spat back. "*You* have no idea what it's like to have that thing in your head! Oh, was seeing the slimy alien scary for you? Try having it crawl down your throat and control you like a fucking puppet!"

Steve clamped his mouth shut and stepped away. He ran his fingers through his hair and tugged on it once, hard.

Billy was breathing raggedly, his face flushed a dull brick red. "You've been fighting it for how long?" he asked.

"I don't know," Steve said.

Behind them, towering thunderheads were building over the top of Ned's roof, like an encroaching mountain range.

"Two years, I guess."

"And you think you and I can do jack shit to stop it."

"It's already dead—"

"Don't be a dumbass, Harrington. I know you're not as stupid as you look. This, all of this," Billy spread his arms and Steve knew he meant the repeating, the dying, all of it—"is because of that thing. I've been fighting it. You think I wasn't trying to get it out of my head? You think I wanted to hurt—" he broke off with a wet breath.

"It's too strong, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't beat it."

Steve looked at him.

Billy had moved to stand in the damp grass by the sidewalk. His shoulders were hunched and he looked exhausted and miserable in the oversized hoodie, his hair a wilted tangle. Steve suddenly thought how much he looked like one of the boys, just a scared kid out his of depth.

Steve had just opened his mouth when a car screeched up to the curb next to Billy and the driver's side door flew open.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't mortal enemies locked in combat," a voice drawled.

Fuck, Steve thought.

Billy straightened. A cool look descended over his face like a curtain.

"Hagan," he said.

Tommy Hagan slid out from behind the wheel of his silver Volvo, smirking with barely suppressed glee.

"Hargrove," he sneered, "I thought that was you."

He gave Steve a cursory once-over, like Steve was a mildly interesting prop on a stage with more diverting things going on.

"Hey, Steve," Tommy said. He was wearing his letterman's jacket and his hair was carefully combed in place. He looked at Steve with the expression he'd begun to wear any time he was in Steve's presence, a sneer so full of disgust it almost seemed to hurt him.

"Hey, Tommy," Steve said.

Billy slowly edged off the grass and back towards Steve, his movements so fluid and casual he seemed like he was just shifting aimlessly, but Tommy's attention went to Billy and stayed put. There was a hungry look in his eyes, like the chops-licking regard of a predator who has found his prey at a disadvantage.

He smirked. "You're quite the popular guy right now, Billy. Your face has been *allllll* over the news."

Billy frowned. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Everybody is looking for you. There's even a reward." He jerked his head at Steve. "Looks like Harrington here found you first, though."

At this Tommy looked at Steve properly for the first time since he'd arrived.

"What do you say, Steve? Two against one. We get him in my car and take him to the station, and then you and I can split the reward money."

His voice had gone soft and cajoling, almost gentle, like they were still friends.

Steve hadn't heard him sound like that in a long time, even before the shit with Nancy had dealt the killing blows to their relationship. Not since right before Carol, in junior year.

Steve and Tommy had always been close, but that fall something had changed. Tommy had finally made it on the team; he'd lost interest in soccer and gotten serious about basketball over the summer, the two of them practicing plays and shooting hoops all through the July heat. They had four classes together, not including PE, and were inseparable. The girls called them the terrible twosome.

And Steve *had* been terrible then. A total class clown, a real Romeo with the ladies, and yeah, he'd bullied the freshman within an inch of their lives. Tommy had been by his side for all of it.

It hadn't just been that though. Most weeknights they went driving for hours, because gas money wasn't a concern for Steve and Tommy's parents didn't give a shit where he was. Tommy crashed in Steve's bed any time he didn't have a girl over.

Somewhere in all that time together, some tension had slipped in between them. Something heavy and loaded that reared its head during practice, when they were both shirtless and grappling for the ball, when they were alone on the interstate and Tommy's eyes stayed on Steve's just a little too long.

Steve had felt it. It hadn't meant anything and he hadn't thought about it, but he'd felt it.

Sometimes Tommy slung his arm around Steve's shoulders and kept it there past the point when Steve would have shrugged anyone else off.

Steve hadn't said anything.

One night, Steve's parents were out of town and he and Tommy had gotten blasted on grain liquor. They'd stumbled upstairs and stripped to their boxers and crashed into Steve's bed, drunk and laughing about something stupid Steve had immediately forgotten.

Steve had been laying there, Tommy's side pleasantly warm against him, the room spinning gently when Tommy had broken the silence and said: "Hey, tell me about Margo."

Margo was the girl of the week then, a real good girl, and Steve had finally gotten her to give him a handy in the Beemer two days before. He'd laughed.

"What about her?"

Tommy's shoulders had brushed his as he shrugged. "I dunno, I mean about the other night."

"She jacked me off." Steve had not even been in the realm of getting it. "I already told you."

"I mean details, Harrington. You were in the Beemer—Front seat, back seat?"

"Oh," Steve had said and thought about it, the scramble into the back of the car, Margo's skirt riding up her thighs. Her mouth on his.

"Back seat," he said.

He was drunk and Tommy's body was giving off heat like a furnace.

"Okay, and what? Did you have to ask her to do it?" Tommy almost sounded out-of-breath.

“No,” Steve said, the memory coming back clear and easy. “No, we were just kissing and she started grabbing me...you know.” He’d flushed, but powered through. “Through my pants.”

Tommy’s hand twitched between them, and then he’d deliberately slid it up to rest on Steve’s thigh. Alarm bells sounded in Steve’s head, but he’d felt drowsy and warm and the heat from Tommy’s hand had been...good.

“And then what?” Tommy said, his voice barely above a whisper.

That’s what had done it, how low his voice had gone. Steve had shuddered and Tommy’s hand had flexed on his thigh and then squeezed.

“Fuck,” Steve had almost gasped, his voice sounding nothing like it normally did, “you know what.”

“Yeah, Tommy had said, “yeah, I know.”

And then his hand had slid down, between Steve’s legs. It crept up his inner thigh, his palm hot. Steve’s skin had been pricking with goose flesh and he’d been growing hard in his boxers.

Tommy knew. Steve knew he knew.

The index finger on Tommy’s hand had just dipped below the leg of Steve’s boxers when some feeling knifed through Steve and he came to life. He seized Tommy’s wrist.

“Stop fucking around,” Steve had said, breathless and going for stern but not making it.

There had been a terrible pause, so long that in it Steve had felt the ties between them severing one by one. Finally Tommy had huffed out a strained sounding laugh in the dark.

“Sure man,” he’d said, and rolled over.

In the morning Tommy was frosty and left without saying more than two words to Steve.

A few days after that, Tommy and Carol, who Steve had never even heard of, were going steady and he and Steve had never hung out alone again.

They still skulked around town and stirred up shit, but never without Carol. And Tommy had turned mean. Meaner than before, at least. Steve went along mostly because when he was mean too Tommy seemed to relax a little, and glimmers of their old friendship showed through.

Steve had only realized later, after they'd finally stopped speaking, that he'd grabbed Tommy's wrist that night because he'd been afraid—not because he hadn't wanted it. He had.

He'd wanted it.

And Steve didn't want to know what that meant about him.

When Tommy had screamed "Run away, just like you always do!" after Steve left him behind at the gas station, Steve had known Tommy wasn't talking about Nancy at all.

Steve jammed his fists in his pockets.

"Forget it man," he said. "We're not taking him anywhere."

Tommy rocked back on his heels like he'd taken a hit. He looked between Steve and Billy with disbelief dawning on his face.

"You're not actually—what, protecting him?" He laughed. "You fucking hate him!"

Steve didn't look at Billy. "They've got the wrong guy," he said. "Billy didn't do what they're saying."

Tommy laughed again. "What the hell do you care?"

When Steve just shrugged Tommy stopped smiling.

"Are you kidding me Harrington?" His face went an ugly shade of purple.

“What, are you two friends now?” ‘*Friends*’ coming out like the word was poison in his mouth.

He jabbed a finger at Billy. “He’s a murderer. My cousin is dead because of him.”

“You’re gonna protect him? *Him*?” Tommy’s voice rose, coming out of him strangled.

“This piece of shit, fucking Cali trailer trash? Daddy’s little punching bag?”

Billy had just been standing there, taking it in silently, but now he laughed jaggedly.

Steve didn’t think about it. He just stepped in front of him.

“Shut your mouth,” he said.

“Or what?” Tommy said, and got in Steve’s face. His breath was oniony and foul.

All the impotent rage from earlier, all of Steve’s pain and frustration, every flash of fear and wave of loneliness—was building in Steve like a swollen river beating against a failing levee.

“How are you going to stop me from saying that shit-stain is a worthless child-killing waste of space—”

The levee smashed to smithereens.

”Like this,” Steve said, and punched him in the mouth.

Tommy went reeling back, stumbling off the curb and into the side of his car. A red welt bloomed on his upper lip and when he came up touching the side of his face a thin stream of blood rolled down his chin.

Overhead the sky split open and rain came down all at once, like turning on a showerhead. The rain was warm like bath water.

Tommy turned his head and spat a mouthful of red into the gutter.

Fuck, Steve thought. His knuckles smarted.

He was screwed if Tommy wanted to make this a fist-fight.

Tommy was shorter than him, but he had maybe fifty pounds of muscle on Steve. They both knew it. Then Tommy looked at Billy behind him and Steve realized he didn't know Billy was hurt.

Billy cracked his neck and said lightly: "Two against one."

Tommy stood there a moment deliberating.

"You just made a big mistake, Harrington," he said at last, and yanked open the driver's side door. "I know where you live."

The Volvo peeled away with the car door still open and swinging.

Steve turned around just in time to see Ned's ancient security guard clear the sliding glass door and start power-walking towards them.

"Oh shit," he gasped, and Billy whipped around, startled.

The guard yelled something unintelligible over the storm. A breathless sound of relief, almost a laugh, came bubbling up from the back of Billy's throat. He began backing away towards the street.

"Better hurry, Harrington, we got about ten minutes to get out of here before he catches up," he said, and tossed the grocery bag into Steve's hands.

The guard stumbled a little and they heard an elderly woman say sharply "Oh dear!"

Then Steve laughed, and Billy, looking sidelong at him, broke into a dazzling grin. He took off running and Steve pounded after him.

The rain had soaked Steve through already, but it felt good. The running felt good too, Billy keeping pace with him, their sneakers splashing through puddles and the wind cool on their faces.

A block from Steve's house Billy finally slowed, stopped, and doubled over.

Steve screeched to a halt. "You okay?" he panted.

Billy flapped a hand at him dismissively. "Just out of breath," he gasped.

The rain tapered off. Steve stood staring up at the sky, the raindrops running into his mouth.

When he looked down, Billy was staring at him, still doubled over with his hands on his knees. He looked away.

Steve blinked the water out of his eyes and chased the feeling he'd had when they were running together, united.

"You said you couldn't beat the flayer on your own."

Billy waited.

"Well," Steve said, and shrugged, "you don't have to. Now it's two against one, right?"

Billy straightened up, shaking his head. "So what, we're gonna kill it with the power of teamwork?"

His mouth was rueful.

Steve just looked back at him steadily.

"Yeah," he said.

Billy's eyes scanned Steve's face, like he was trying to find a crack in his facade. There wasn't any. Steve meant it.

Billy was a rat bastard, but he was smart, and he clearly paid attention. And Steve was stubborn. He'd been knocked down a hundred times, but he could take a hit and he could get back up.

We could do it, he thought. Together.

Apparently satisfied, Billy broke eye contact and let out a short little

laugh.

“You sound like one of the brats,” he said, but his voice wasn’t harsh at all, like he didn’t mean it as a rebuke.

Steve tamped down on a grin.

“Yeah, well, the kids and I have a lot in common,” he said, and tapped his temple meaningfully.

“Low IQs?” Billy offered wearily, and then Steve did grin.

He handed Billy the grocery bag and Billy looked down at it.

“I didn’t ask you to—” he said quietly and then cut himself off, like he hadn’t meant to speak at all.

Steve thought he meant the bandages.

“You said you needed them, so.”

Billy shook his head sharply. “I can fight my own battles, Harrington,” he said and looked at Steve with his clear blue eyes.

He said it the way he said anything that wasn’t a yell, almost apologetically, as if he was embarrassed to be caught feeling something other than pure animal rage.

Oh, Steve thought.

“Yeah well,” he said, and didn’t say *‘you shouldn’t always have to,’* which was what he thought, as fiercely as if Billy was actually his friend.

It was only that Billy looked like a drowned rat now, and was shivering a little, and Steve kept hearing Tommy’s sneering voice saying “*daddy’s little punching bag*,” and it reminded Steve of all the times Billy had come to school with bruises on his face, and all the times his face had looked fine but he’d whipped off his shirt in the locker room and the bruises were on his ribs instead, or his arms, or his stomach.

"Tommy's had that punch coming for a long time anyway," Steve said.

The corner of Billy's mouth curled up.

In the foyer Billy peeled away and headed into the master bedroom. He looked pale.

"Just let me change the bandages and then we can go," he said.

Steve hurried to the phone and dug through the rolodex on the counter until he found Robin's number scribbled on a Scoops receipt, under which he'd written "ice cream girl. Kinda hot."

The phone rang and rang. Steve sighed and put the receiver back on the wall.

He knew Tommy would waste no time in calling the cops, so Steve figured they had about ten minutes to get the hell out of dodge.

He had a general idea of where Robin lived, and once he and Billy got to The Pines he thought they could sneak around until one of them caught sight of Robin's curly hair in a window...or something. He'd cross that bridge when they came to it.

Steve eyed the clock in the kitchen and wandered over to the fridge. He poked around blindly in the crisper until he found a bruised Granny Smith apple and polished it on his shirt. The phone rang, shrill in the quiet house.

Steve took a bite of the apple and snagged the phone off its cradle.

"Hey Robin," he said, crunching his way through a mouthful of fruit, "are you at home?"

"Steve," Robin said, quick and urgent, "is Billy still with you?"

Steve looked towards the living room. "Last time I checked," he said. Dread reached out a skeletal finger and dragged a path down his spine.

“They’re coming,” Robin said. ”They’re—“ she was tripping over her words in her haste,—it’s on the news, *shit-eater* just said they got a tip about Billy’s whereabouts—”

Shit-eater was their nickname for one of the anchors, a slick guy who interrupted primetime TV with breaking news and always seemed slightly smug about it—hence the name.

“There’s helicopter footage, Steve, a ton of cops and like—SWAT guys, in a neighborhood that looks a hell of a lot like yours—“

Steve didn’t even hang up, he just dropped the receiver. It smacked against the tile behind him but he didn’t hear it, he was already sprinting across the living room and down the hall.

The master bedroom door was ajar. Steve shoved through it like a battering ram and it hit the wall with a loud smack. Steve didn’t hear that either.

In his peripheral vision he saw the empty Ned’s sack crumpled on the immaculately made bed.

Steve slammed the closed bathroom door with the flat of his palm. “Hargrove!” he yelled, “we gotta go, now!”

There was a clatter as something metallic landed on the tile in the bathroom. A low distressed noise followed it.

Steve’s brain couldn’t seem to string together full thoughts. All he could focus on was the pounding of his heartbeat in his ears and a voice in the back of his head screaming: *They’re coming now! Now!*

“Hargrove—” he said, forcing himself not to scream, ”Billy! The cops are—”

His rattled the doorknob wildly. “They’re down the street. We gotta go out the back—”

Two sounds came in quick succession: a dull thump like a body stumbling into the side of the toilet, and the flutter of cardboard boxes falling into a heap.

Steve shut up.

“No,” Billy moaned, barely audible.

Steve forgot the cops. He hammered on the door with the flat of his hand again. “Hey man, are you okay? What’s happening—”

“Harrington,” croaked Billy’s voice, “get out of here.”

“Like hell,” Steve said and tried the door knob again.

Then Billy made a noise of pure pain, a bit-off scream, and Steve made up his mind. He stepped back and smashed his foot into the wood by the door handle. The door rattled on his hinges. Steve kicked it again and again. Little splinters of wood broke off the door jam.

Billy was saying something weakly, “don’t,” or “stop” maybe, but Steve ignored him.

He backed up and ran at the door, smashing into it with his shoulder, and under the full weight of his body the lock gave.

Steve went stumbling into the bathroom and caught himself on the counter.

Billy sat on the lid of the toilet, paper white and braced between the tub and the vanity. His side was a mess of dripping black blood, like he’d been splattered with motor oil. Black veins snaked up his neck from under his shirt collar. A wet knife lay on the floor by his feet.

Steve stared. Billy looked back at him with wide eyes.

“What—” Steve managed and then Billy was panting out an explanation, his voice sliced to ribbons with desperation: “I thought I could get it out, Harrington—cut it—I tried—”

He winced as a shudder overtook him. Black vines crawled down his arms.

“How long have you known?” Steve asked, which was the wrong thing to ask, it didn’t matter, but all he could think was, *how long?*—

"Since the lab," Billy rasped.

Steve's vision grayed out.

He'd been with Billy for days now—*Robin* had sat alone with him, the *kids were here*.

"You knew this whole time, and you didn't tell me," Steve said.

Billy gave another shudder and doubled over, clutching at his head. He screamed once and then stood on unsteady feet. His movements were listing and uncoordinated, like a drunk.

"Get out, Harrington, get the fuck out," he gasped.

Steve's body seemed to realize the level of danger he was in, even if his mind didn't. His feet dragged him backwards out of the bathroom while his mouth ran on.

"Unbelievable," Steve snarled. "This is so fucking like you, Hargrove. Of course, *of course*, you've had an alien inside you this whole time."

Steve's feet carried him straight back into the four poster bed. His ankle snagged on the leg of the bedframe and he went sprawling into the carpet.

From overhead came the steady chopping sound of helicopter blades.

Billy followed him through the ruin of the bathroom door, his hands still fisted in his hair, his eyes comically wide. *Run*, his eyes screamed.

Steve was beyond fear. All he could do was lay there raving. "Just when I think I can stand you, you remind me how much of an asshole you are," he spat, "how the hell can I ever look at you again, or work with you, or even *trust* you—"

"You can't," the flayer said, through Billy's mouth.

Billy's hands dropped from his hair and his face was blank—and then Steve was afraid.

Steve made a sound and rolled over, scrambling to his feet, but Billy caught the tail of his shirt as he got up. Steve didn't stop, he just kept going, throwing all of his weight forward. His shirt ripped and he went flying forward into the hall. Steve fell, and got up again.

"Wait, Steve," the flayer's dead voice called, "come back. I just want to talk!"

Steve barreled down the hall and turned the corner into the den.

He'd gotten a few feet onto the carpet when something hard hit him in the back, and he stumbled and went careening headlong into the couch. The lamp from his parents' bedroom rolled across the living room floor.

Steve wrenched himself upright, clutching the couch's armrest for support.

Billy stood a few feet away, his weight on the balls of his feet and his hands out in front of him, loose and ready to grab. He looked like a goalie. He smiled.

Steve glanced towards the kitchen and then back at the foyer, and flayer Billy feigned in the direction of his gaze.

Steve flinched.

Still a bully even while possessed, he thought.

His face felt hot. There'd been a moment, in the bathroom, when he'd felt the sting of betrayal, the pain almost as sharp as it had been the first time he'd seen Jonathan and Nancy together.

Now he felt a reflexive jerk of shame for how stupidly pleased he'd been when he thought he and Billy might be getting along. Steve had fallen for it completely. Billy must have been laughing at him.

Steve looked at the kitchen again. There was a bat wedged between the refrigerator and the wall. A good bat, too. Sturdy.

"You said you wanted to talk," Steve said, slowly reaching behind him. "Well, I've actually been wondering something."

The flayer smiled placidly and shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

Steve's hand scrabbled behind him. "I've been wondering...What's it like being a giant squid with alien powers and *still* getting beaten by a bunch of kids?"

Steve's fingers touched soft velvet. On Billy's face the smile was dying out, like a candle burned low. Steve's hand closed around a decorative pillow.

This is a bad plan, he thought.

"I'm done playing games," the flayer hissed.

"Me too," Steve said and hurled the pillow at his face.

He pushed himself off the armrest and leapt forward, vaulting onto the ootoman. One leg made it over the side, and then a strong arm wrapped around his waist.

Steve had just enough time to gasp in a breath before he was flying bodily back through the air. He smashed into the narrow coffee table, collapsing it under his weight. Broken chunks of wood exploded in every direction.

Billy's face loomed over him.

Steve groaned and tried to roll over.

"I *will* kill the girl," the flayer rasped, as he leaned in and grabbed a handful of Steve's shirt. "*And* all her friends."

He levered Steve's upper body up with one hand until the floor was solid under Steve's feet, as easily as if he were righting a toppled over bottle.

"But first," the flayer continued in a low hiss, "I'll start with you."

He spun Steve around and shoved him violently toward the kitchen. Steve hit the hardwood on his knees. Blood dripped down the back of his neck and one of his thighs burned like it had fallen asleep.

Steve heard himself make a pained little noise.

Billy still stood motionless in the living room. He raised his eyebrows, as if to say *well?*

Steve turned his back and hauled himself into the kitchen. He'd staggered two steps toward the refrigerator when a foot smashed into the hinge of his knee.

Steve screamed and fell to the tile, rolling himself towards the stove off to his right. He kept going until his shin touched the cool metal of the oven, then he grabbed for the counter and dragged himself upright, a moan balled in his throat. His whole leg felt dead.

Billy leaned in the entryway watching him.

For a long moment they stood on opposite sides of the kitchen, just looking at each other. The flayer was perfectly composed.

Steve was out of breath.

He knew even if he managed to get ahold of the bat—which was a big if—he didn't stand a chance against the flayer. Steve could hardly see through the haze of pain.

But—Billy had fought it once before. Maybe Steve could reach him again.

"You don't have to do this," Steve panted. "Billy. I know you're in there."

An almost...pleased expression darted across the flayer's face. His eyes narrowed like a cat curled in a patch of sunlight.

Steve began edging along the counter towards the fridge. "C'mon, you asshole," he said, "You're always ready for a fight, and now you're backing down?"

The flayer watched him impassively.

"What, you need me to throw the first punch again? You just gonna let me handle this one too?"

Steve was a few feet from the fridge and Billy's face was as still as a marble sculpture.

He felt a tremble of real rage go through him. "So *I'm* the coward huh?" A bitter laugh fell out of his mouth like a stone.

"You just sit back and let it control you."

He was at the fridge now, his back flat on the cool aluminum.

"Kind of like your dad," he spat.

The flayer shivered. All at once Billy was in front of Steve, his palm on Steve's throat.

Steve gasped and stretched towards the back of the refrigerator. Billy pulled him forward by the throat, his hand flexing on Steve's neck, and then he slammed Steve back into the fridge.

Steve's head hit the freezer and he saw stars. His fingertips brushed the wall.

The flayer looked at him with Billy's eyes, a blue so deep if Steve leaned forward he might fall in.

"Fuck you," Steve choked out.

His hand closed over the handle of the bat and in one smooth motion, he yanked it free and brought it crashing down onto the meat of Billy's shoulder.

The flayer didn't even flinch. He caught Steve's forearm with brutal strength and snapped it to the right.

Steve screamed. The bat dropped from his grip.

Everything was going black. The pain in Steve's arm was monumental, it blocked everything else out.

"Why are you doing this?" he moaned. He wasn't even sure he meant to say it out loud. He didn't want to die.

If the flayer had decided to assimilate him instead of killing him,

would that break the loop? Would he have to live the rest of his short life as a fertilizer-eating puppet? Steve pictured himself reaching into a bag of manure and moaned again.

The flayer paused, as if in thought, and said: "The pain...fortifies us."

Steve winced. "You *feed* on my pain?"

Now flayer looked confused. "*Your* pain?" it said.

It let go of Steve's arm.

Steve saw it look at its hand as in consternation, as though the appendage had moved independent of the flayer's will. Suddenly, its other hand lifted. Billy took Steve's face between his palms almost tenderly.

"No—" Steve said, registering the anger on Billy's face and the naked horror in his eyes, and then the flayer snapped Steve's neck.

Steve jerked forward, the steering wheel alive under his hands and Robin screaming right in his ear.

He sucked in a breath of the humid night air.

You're dead Billy Hargrove, Steve thought.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm back baby!!! Thanks to everyone who left such kind comments on the last chapter! You guys are why I'm sticking with this fic!

This story will not be abandoned, but as you can imagine, I didn't feel like writing much in the last year or so. I'm going to update more often from now on!

Steve had gotten himself into position fueled only by pure, unadulterated rage.

The entire journey from his car into the mall had passed in a blind haze of murder. The only thing he could recall with any clarity was stopping to viciously kick the fender of Billy's Camaro. Billy was a still slumped shape in the drivers seat.

"I'm coming for you," Steve had hissed.

Then one of Billy's broad hands twitched on the steering wheel and Steve had hastened into the mall.

He'd said...something to the kids. Something convincing enough to get them to follow his plan, but his exact words were lost to him.

El had been staring and staring at him, and Max had seemed strangely galvanized by his cold fury.

"Yeah," she'd crowed and pumped her fist, "we're gonna get the motherfucker!"

"Mother...fucker?" El asked.

"Don't repeat that," Mike said hurriedly.

Steve left El standing in the hall alone again, and for the first time he didn't look back at her. There was no room inside of him for anything other than the desire to wrap his hands around Billy's throat.

Huddled in his hiding spot, Steve fumed.

The flayer had been coiled inside Billy like a spring for the last two days, and he had kept it to himself. Steve had defended him.

Steve had thought...he didn't know what he'd thought.

His blood thrummed through him and he could feel his heartbeat in his fingertips.

Bah-bum. Bah-bum, his heart said.

The beat changed and became *Bill-y. Har-grove. Bill-y. Har-grove.*

Time stretched like putty and Steve's mind turned over and over, his heart just whispering a name.

And then suddenly there was the flayer crashing through the skylight, loud as God, and Steve didn't have to think anything.

There was only now.

Now, Billy was dragging El into the atrium.

Now, the fireworks blasted off, bright cracks against the deep dull noise of the flayer roaring.

Now, Billy was on top of El.

Steve rose into a crouch.

Now, El was touching Billy's face with her little shaking hand.

Steve glanced over at Max and Mike a few yards away. They wore twin expressions of confused panic. Mike shook his head at Steve. He was moving too soon.

Steve ignored them.

Now, Billy's eyes were closing.

Now, Steve's heart said, and then he was running.

Mike screamed his name from what sounded like miles away, but Steve kept going. His feet were in control again and this time he wasn't fighting them.

Billy had just let go of El and stood up to face the flayer when Steve smashed into his side.

They landed with a bone crunching thud on the hard tile. Steve heard El cry out behind him, and the sound of Mike and Max's thudding footsteps, the flayer's shriek of protest.

None of it mattered.

Steve only had eyes for Billy.

"You fucking bastard!" Steve howled.

Steve was on top of him, straddling his legs.

Billy's eyelids fluttered open. For a second he looked almost comically surprised. Then he started to laugh.

"Shut up!" Steve roared, and reared back his fist.

Before he could land a punch, Billy hooked an ankle around his calf and rolled them. Steve heard himself make a mindless squawk of protest and then he was on his back on the cold tile. Fireworks popped overhead.

Billy scrambled across him, still grinning. The bastard was *grinning*.

His hands came yanking at Steve's shirt, hauling him up.

"Come on, Harrington," he roared over the din.

A tentacle landed with a percussive thump in the space Steve's leg had previously occupied and Steve decided to let himself be pulled out of the line of fire.

He got his feet under him and they went stumbling through the debris to the service hallway.

Billy immediately plastered himself against the jutting corner of the hall's opening, peering around through the gloom at the mayhem. His spine was one lean line, his shoulders broad and brown. There were freckles on the back of his neck.

Half-turning, he caught Steve's glare and grinned again.

"Harrington, you look furious," he drawled, as if they were back in Steve's house, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

His curls were falling in his eyes. Steve entertained the idea of brushing them out of his face before he punched him.

"Yeah, I wonder why," Steve spat.

Billy was still smiling, as if he couldn't stop, and Steve couldn't look him in the face.

He tore his eyes away. They caught on Billy's tank top and hung there. The fabric was filthy with dirt and grease.

No blood.

Steve had managed to tackle him before the flayer got its claws in his side. Billy was...relieved, Steve realized. He was whole, in one piece. This had to be the first time he wasn't in agony for weeks.

Following his gaze, Billy lifted the hem of his shirt until his unblemished ribs were in view. Steve looked and then looked away.

"You finally did something right," Billy said.

He sounded warm, only slightly mocking. He took a step backwards, towards the atrium.

"*I finally—*" Steve exploded, but an earsplitting screech from the flayer cut him off.

Billy kept backing up, continuing to move towards the atrium, his

eyes on Steve.

“You look like you need to blow off some steam,” he said, his voice almost a croon.

Steve stayed where he was.

“What are you doing?” he hissed.

A chair whizzed by behind Billy, as though it had been picked up in a whirlwind. He glanced mildly over his shoulder and took another step back.

“Tell ya what, Harrington.” His eyes were alight, they were on fire, burning out of his head. “I’m gonna go kick this thing’s ass, and when I’m finished, you can take a shot at me.”

The current of a laugh ran under his voice.

He was clearly insane, Steve decided.

“Get back here,” he hissed again, motioning frantically with both hands. “You’re gonna get yourself killed.”

Billy was a few feet beyond the mouth of the hall. He grinned and raised an eyebrow.

“Not this time,” he said, and took off running out of view.

“Cmon, Harrington!” came floating back to Steve on the wind.

Steve blinked.

Pummeling. He was supposed to be *pummeling* Billy into the dirt right now, not edging after him and wringing his hands.

He shuffled into the atrium and squinted in the direction Billy had gone.

Billy stood a few yards away in what remained of the food court, doubled over and rooting around in the debris by his feet.

“Hey!” he screamed, straightening up. In his hands was a thick wedge

of dry wall.

As Steve watched, he hurled it, frisby-style, at the flayer's side. It hit the creature's thick hide and crumbled in a puff of white dust. A chunk of the Payless sign went flying next. It struck the flayer on the same spot the drywall had.

"Hey, over here, asshole!"

The flayer carried on roaring, its thick tentacles smashing at the tile like a toddler pounding the ground in the midst of a prodigious tantrum.

Max, El, and Mike were nowhere in sight, but Steve knew they had to be pinned down in a bolt hole somewhere.

He cursed under his breath and snatched up a potted plant.

"He said '*over here!*'" Steve roared, and flung the pot as hard as he could.

They kept up a volley of debris—rocks from the faux plant garden, squares of tile, basketball sized boulders of concrete—lobbing one thing after the next with single-minded concentration.

At last the flayer swiveled towards them.

Steve got a whiff of its putrid breath as a tentacle shot out like a dart and stabbed the wall a few feet to Steve's left.

In his peripheral vision, Max's fiery red head popped out from under the counter at Gino's Pizza. El and Will were barely visible huddled behind her.

Billy's eyes fastened on the dark blur that was El's curly hair.

"Go!" he yelled, "all of you run!" Then to Max: "Get Firestarter out of here! We'll hold it off!"

We'll? Steve thought.

But Billy was moving, wading into a graveyard of smashed food court

tables.

He braced one booted foot on the underside of the nearest table and snapped thick wooden leg off with one hard wrench.

“Hey, King Steve” he called. He was grinning with the lights of the fireworks splashing across his face.

“Catch!”

He tossed the leg at Steve, and Steve caught it out of the air. Billy snapped off another leg for himself.

The flayer’s inability to reach El had sent it into an apoplectic frenzy. It roared and thrashed, fat tentacles shooting out in every direction. The ground quaked under Steve’s feet.

Getting close to the flayer would be suicide, insane, the stupidest thing Steve could think of—

“Let’s wreck this bitch,” Billy said, and spinning the table leg in his hands, charged towards the flayer’s oily flank.

Steve cursed.

He followed at a flat sprint.

Billy hit the first tentacle that came at him underhanded like a baseball player nailing an easy pitch, twisting at the waist, his right foot turning inward. The tentacle made a dull thwack on the wood.

Steve came skidding up at his six in time to chop down savagely at a tentacle aimed at Billy’s side.

He gasped as the impact reverberated up his arms. The tentacle felt like soft blubber on the outside with a steel core.

The fireworks exploded in his ears, dazing him, and Steve had time to feel afraid.

Oh god, he thought, an inarticulate prayer.

The first two attacks had been uncoordinated, lazy, like Billy was a gnat the flayer could dispatch without much trouble. But now Steve could feel the full weight of its awareness move over him like a shadow.

They had its attention. And the tentacles fell on them with force.

The crack of the fireworks faded out, the flayer's screeches turned down to a dull roar. There was only the burning wood in his hands and the feel of his body moving, acting on instinct. Bobbing and weaving this way and that—a hit to the left, then dodging to the right, feigning right again, smashing down on a tentacle, his elbows creaking, the squeak of his rubber soles on the floor.

Billy stayed with him through all of it, a moving blur in his peripherals.

It was...good.

Like dancing, or maybe even having sex, losing himself to the rhythm, forgetting everything except the next step.

Fighting the flayer was like being on the basketball court on a good day, when every move Steve made was the right one, when the ball flowed into and out of his hands like it was part of him, like an extension of himself.

Steve heard himself laugh in time with the crack of the table leg across the grasping end of a tentacle. He dodged back and glanced to his right.

Billy was looking at him—his hands occupied with stabbing viciously at the scaled side of a tentacle, but his eyes on Steve.

“There’s your fire, Harrington,” he roared, grinning with all his teeth.

He parried an incoming jab and threw himself back into the fray.

The flayer mounted a fresh attack, javeling tentacles at them from either side, forcing retreat.

Steve’s back met Billy’s and they pressed together panting.

“It has to die soon, right?” Steve gasped.

There was a jolt as Billy blocked a heavy blow from above, his shoulders knocking back hard against Steve’s.

He grunted.

When he spoke his voice sounded like it was right in Steve’s ear. “Don’t ask me, I’m usually dead by now.”

Billy’s skin was fever hot, Steve could feel it through the thin cotton of his Scoops uniform. His sweat too, where their arms brushed.

Steve had an insane image of Billy in the locker room, fresh from a shower, the towel around his waist shockingly white against his deep tan, the shift of muscles under his skin.

A tentacle wrapped around Steve’s ankle and yanked him off his feet and the image of Billy was gone, replaced by a white haze of terror. He went down hard on the tile, losing his grip on the chair leg.

No, Steve thought, and for a moment he wanted his mom more than anything in the world.

Then Billy was there, stabbing wildly at the tentacle, his face contorted in a furious grimace.

The sound in the atrium returned to full volume, and the scream the flayer let out needled into Steve’s eardrum. Billy’s chair leg sunk into the slimy flesh of the tentacle and green fluid splashed up the wood, eating some of it away.

It let go of Steve’s ankle with a deafening screech and Steve scrambled onto his feet. Billy came for him. He grabbed Steve’s elbow and steered him back under the awning.

Billy’s eyes were wide but he was still grinning. His teeth were very white.

“Can’t leave you alone for a second, huh?” he said.

Steve’s heart thundered in his throat.

If Billy had been anyone else, Steve would have hugged him in relief. Clapped his back probably, said 'thanks man.'

Not Billy.

Steve would no more have touched him than he would have put his hand on a hot stove.

He stepped away and ran his fingers through his hair, panting. "It just got lucky, okay? I was on my A-game out there."

He almost said *you distracted me*, but bit it back. What if Billy questioned him?

Steve imagined himself saying: "I thought about you in a towel and then almost let myself become alien chow?"

Billy laughed. They both looked toward the center of the atrium.

Something was happening.

The flayer froze for a heartbeat. A thin shudder ran through its massive body. It screamed at a glass-shattering pitch.

Steve hands came up to cover his ears and the flayer collapsed onto the tile. A white cloud of dust puffed up around its massive body.

Thank god, Steve breathed, and next to him Billy stumbled, just two steps, like he'd tripped on something, or had drunkly lost his balance.

He bent at the waist.

"What?" Steve said.

Across the room, the kids appeared out of their hiding place. Max was, as always, visible in the gloom.

Still doubled over, Billy turned his face up and looked at Steve.

The change was so sudden Steve stiffened in shock.

Gone was Billy's laughing relief, his uncontainable joy. His expression was one of a numb shock and horror, and underneath it, somehow

worst of all, was a terrible resignation, like he had known things were too good to be true and finally had his suspicions confirmed.

He looked down at his hands and then looked back at Steve.

For a second it was if a door behind his eyes had opened, a door that had been previously locked tight, and something inside the open door beckoned Steve in.

Steve felt the pull in his chest like a string had been tied to his ribs and then yanked.

He put his hand out to reach for Billy, not thinking about it at all, just reaching, and Billy disintegrated.

“No!” Max howled.

Steve just blinked, once and then again.

In the spot where Billy had been standing was a ruddy spill of jelly-like goo. No clothes, no strand of perfect hair, no stupid earring.

Steve sat down.

It didn't seem right to keep standing, and more pressingly, there was a roaring in his chest like the sound of the air whizzing past his ears when he jumped from the highest diving board at the Hawkins Community Pool.

Max broke into husky sobs across the room. Mike and El were holding her down to keep her from coming any closer.

Good, Steve thought.

The army came.

Steve didn't move until a soldier's shiny black boot stepped into the middle of the Billy-goo and Steve made an involuntary noise like he'd been hit in the stomach.

He jerked his face away and blindly rose to his feet.

Robin was there and then she wasn't. Someone handed Steve his keys.

He was in the parking lot.

Then he was in his car.

When Steve came back to himself he was standing in his living room listening to the metronome tick of his mother's cuckoo clock. The street light shining outside made the room look painted orange. The house was very quiet.

There was no Billy.

Steve went to bed.

—

Nancy hammered at the door in the morning and Steve sent her away by calling from his bedroom window: "I'm fine, go home."

He didn't reply when she protested.

He went back to bed and slept badly. His head ached.

The phone ringing downstairs woke him.

Steve answered it and said "Don't come over in the morning, Dustin. I swear to God."

"Come over? I wasn't going to come over"

"Yeah well, just in case you were. Don't, okay? We'll talk in a few days. I just need some alone time."

Steve hung up before Dustin could ask him if he was okay.

He toted the bottle of his fathers bourbon he'd shared with Billy out to the pool and drank it while he sat on a plastic lounge chair.

He was tired. He was so damn tired.

All his anger at Billy had evaporated, and beneath it was again the

terrible feeling of his aloneness.

Steve lost in time, Steve left behind. No parents, big house.

What the hell had happened? He'd done everything right that time, even Billy had said so.

He'd never disintegrated before. Steve knew the flayer's puppets died when it did; he'd overheard the soldiers talking about the oozing piles of gelatinous slime all over town.

He went over it all in his head, coughing through sips of bourbon.

His traitorous mind kept snagging on Billy's face just before he died. The look in his eyes. Steve putting out his hand.

He drank until the world spun.

Steve stumbled inside and went to bed.

—

Late afternoon.

Steve was powerfully hungover, drinking from the tap in the upstairs bathroom.

The storm waging outside had pulled him from a sleep so deep there were little crease marks from the pillow on his face.

He pawed open a drawer and went hunting for a bottle of aspirin. Under his fingers: A little roll of tums, a tube of cortisone cream, a package of q-tips, a small box of bandages, a few loose anti-histamines, a travel sized shaker of talcum powder—

Steve stopped.

The Bandages.

It came to him in a hot flash that tingled through his body like a blast of cold air from the AC.

He saw Billy lifting up his shirt and grinning, his smooth belly

unmarked, and then he saw Billy bleeding out under his hands in the Starcourt dust.

“Motherfucker,” Steve said.

He was out of the bathroom.

Trouble on the stairs—Steve moving fast and nearly slipping, the carpet slick smooth under his feet. Catching himself on the banister and saying aloud “Motherfucker,” again.

He went outside through the sliding glass door and left it open behind him. Rain blew in his eyes and mouth. Lightning flashed through low clouds in the east.

In Steve was a building rage, the black hatred of any free creature who has found itself caged.

“Cmon,” he screamed. “End it!”

He shouldn’t have stopped himself from slipping on the stairs. A reflex. Living was a reflex.

The wind whipped his hair back from his face. Lightning flashed again, closer this time. If his luck held he’d be back in the Toddfrthr in about three minutes.

What a joke, Steve thought.

Whatever was happening to him was a colossal joke to someone—God, the universe, it didn’t matter.

“What am I supposed to do! Save him, not save him? Who gives a shit as long as I die, right?” He was yelling so loudly his throat ached.

Thunder boomed.

Steve could see the hot streaks of electricity arching through the clouds overhead.

“So hit me! Get it over with!”

Steve didn't pray, and he hadn't been to church in about eight years. His mom had a clay cross she'd bought in a souvenir shop in Albuquerque hanging in the home office, but otherwise the house was free from religious paraphernalia.

Steve entertained a brief thought of going inside to smash the cross to smithereens.

His notions of God were murky, childish things, but he remembered one thing from Sunday school: God was vengeful. This felt like he was being punished. His eyes burned.

"I'm sorry," Steve bawled into the rain. "If you want me to be sorry, I'm so fucking sorry."

Tommy's face swirled through his head.

"I'm sorry for everything I've ever—"

The light was so bright he immediately went night-blind, and the ensuing crack split the air in two.

Steve screamed.

The sound exploded around him. He hit the hard pavement on his knees and pain spiked up his legs.

The last thing Steve heard was a creak above him as the thickest branch on the oak by his house cleaved away from the tree trunk. It came down on his head.
